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Carbon Paper Still Messy, Still in Use

By JULIA LAWLOR

ONE of the happiest moments of Norma Carey's life was the day she threw away her carbon paper. It was the early 1970's when her employer, a law firm in Washington, switched from carbons to copiers.

"I was absolutely delighted," said Ms. Carey, 64, a legal secretary for Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld. No more ink on the hands from handling slimy black carbons. No more furious crasing. And no more retyping 20-page documents. Not once, Ms. Carey said, has she felt nostalgic about the messy staff.

With today's laser and ink-jet printers, word processors, and voice-recognition and spell-checking software, carbon paper -- invented by an Englishman named Ralph Wedgwood in the 1820's -- is but a shadow of the crucial commodity it was. Using carbon paper today is like using a mortar and pestle instead of a food processor, or pounding your laundry against a rock instead of using a washing machine. Yet there remains a small but steady demand for it.

"Somebody's buying it," said Jim Gordon, president of Form-Mate Carbon Products of Toronto. Eighty percent of Mr. Gordon's business is in one-time carbon paper -- the thin, tissuelike carbon paper found on business forms that is used once and thrown away. The remainder of his business is in re-usable carbon paper -- thicker, carbon-coated paper sheets available in office supply or stationery stores and usually used to make duplicates in typewriters or by hand.

Many of his orders are for export, Mr. Gordon said, to countries that are not as technologically advanced as the United States. "I wrote a report back in 1976 that predicted there would be no need for carbon paper within 10 years," Mr. Gordon recalled. "That was 22 years ago."

A handful of companies in North America still manufacture carbon paper. Norman McLeod, a senior consultant with CAP Ventures of Norwell, Mass., said 24,000 tons of one-time carbon paper was produced in 1997, down from a peak of 220,000 tons in 1979. Today, a few thousand tons a year of re-usable carbon paper is produced, down from about 30,000 tons annually 25 years ago. Demand has dropped by 85 percent in the last 20 years, Mr. McLeod said. The reason: computers have made manual and electric typewriters all but obsolete. Copying machines, laser printers and carbonless paper -- which uses a chemical process to create copies without the need for carbon paper -- were the final blow. But Mr. McLeod said he did not believe that carbon paper would disappear entirely.

"It's not the way it used to be," said Jeffrey Dadowski, president of Codo Manufacturing in Leetsdale, Pa., "but there's still a lot of use for it." Codo has been making carbon paper since 1928. Most of the business is in one-time carbons for business forms, but Codo also manufactures special carbon-coated paper that dentists use to make impressions of teeth and carbon paper used for dressmaking patterns. "Carbon is still the best inexpensive way to make multiple copies," Mr. Dadowski said. "With the carbonless forms, after the third or fourth copy you can't read it."

Frye Tech of Boca Raton, Fla., is the nation's leading manufacturer of carbon paper, with \$48 million in sales last year. The company began as Frye Copy Systems in Des Moines in 1912, and as demand for carbon paper shrank, Frye Tech bought up its competitors. Most of its business is in making one-time carbons for multipart business forms.

"As long as computers are not 100 percent foolproof, there will be a need for carbon," said Marc Leder, managing director of Frye Tech.

The ink on carbon paper also works well in cold environments, unlike carbonless paper. That is why many fuel-oil companies use carbon forms for receipts, and why airlines that fly in cold climates have luggage tickets with one-time carbons on hand when computers fail.

At the Korectype company in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, three ancient carbon-coating machines sit forlornly in a corner of a 170,000 square-foot factory presided over by the company's founder and 72-year-old president, Victor Barouh. When the factory opened 35 years ago, half its revenue came from carbon paper. Today, the re-usable carbons it makes represent just 1 percent or 2 percent of revenue, and most of that is sold overseas. The company also makes the special carbon paper for dentists, in addition to ribbons, ink jets, correction fluid and correction tape for typewriters.

The carbon-coating machines, which are at least 75 years old and the size of small jeeps, apply a mixture of ink and wax to paper that is drawn through a series of rollers. The paper is coated with ink mixed with hot water then drawn through several chilling rollers that have cold water circulating through them and solidify the ink mixture on contact.

These days, Mr. Barouh said, the three machines are rarely used. Korectype produces at most 50,000 boxes of re-usable carbon paper a year, and only about 100 boxes are sold in the United States. An order filled in mid-October was bound for a South American country,

where, Mr. Barouh said, "the dealer will probably sell it to the government."

Who in the United States buys carbon paper these days? Many small businesses like video repair shops, dry cleaners, shoe stores and delicatessens use business forms with one-time carbons attached. Staples, the office supply chain, sells slightly more than 1,000 packages of re-usable carbon paper a week, and sales have declined every year for the 12 years the chain has been in business.

Some small stationery stores carry carbon paper -- just in case. Hygrade Typewriter and Stationery Co. in Morristown, N.J., a 65-year-old family-run business, sells just 12 sheets of carbon paper a month now.

"It's a quiet item," owner John Hunt said. Before "N.C.R. paper" -- no carbon required -- and copying machines, carbon paper was the only way to make duplicates, Mr. Hunt said. Law firms used to be big customers, Mr. Hunt said, and the store would typically sell between six and 12 boxes of 100 sheets each a month. Today's typical buyer might occasionally need a sheet or two to copy a handwritten letter, or transfer a pattern.

Unlike antique typewriters, carbon paper has not caught on as a collectible -- with one exception. "The packages they came in were so lovely," said Darryl Rehr, author of the book "Antique Typewriters and Office Collectibles." Mr. Rehr occasionally finds them at flea markets or antique malls. He also points out that carbon paper played a starring role in the invention of the typewriter in 1873, when Christopher Lathan Sholes used it to demonstrate his first typewriter.

But carbon paper's legacy lives on in the modern office in the abbreviation "cc" for carbon copy, which still appears at the end of many a memo composed on a personal computer and sent via E-mail. And programs used to compose E-mail have a "cc" function to send a message to more than one person.

Recently, Theresa Scheese, a 39-year-old freelance secretary in Yardley, Pa., had to explain the abbreviation to her two children, ages 13 and 10, who had seen it on America Online. "I said well, a hundred years ago when I started typing, 'cc' meant carbon copy," Ms. Scheese recalled. She went on to explain to the children how she used to spend days typing and retyping lengthy forms that sometimes involved as many as 10 carbons.

The children's response: "Why didn't you just use a copier?"