

Twenty Years a Typesetter

By Marilyn Reeves

Back in the days before you bought your first PC, you may have needed to have letterheads and matching envelopes – possibly even a set of business cards – designed and printed for you. Or perhaps you wanted a flyer or a nice looking brochure done up, or a newsletter, or even a catalog complete with pictures and captions. You would have taken a rough sketch of your ideas to the local print shop, told the person at the counter you needed it ‘yesterday’ and left it in their capable hands.

The clerk would write up a Work Order and pass the instructions on to the typesetter to prepare the ‘camera-ready art.’ The artwork would be laid on the camera’s glass with a screen that embedded tiny dots in the image. The image on the film would be transferred onto a metal plate which the pressman would mount on his offset press. The press would then print out as many copies as you ordered in the colors you wanted, and on the kind of paper you selected. You’d be called when the job was finished to come pick it up and be on your merry way.

If you came into a little shop in Aurora called Printing Unlimited, I may have been the one who wrote up your order. And after I learned how to operate the electronic typesetting machine called a Compugraphic Editwriter, I was the one who designed the art work.

Using the Editwriter was a bit tricky in that, unlike today’s PC, I wasn’t able to view the changes in fonts or type sizes on screen. I had to make an educated guess and wait to see the results captured on the long strip of photographic paper, which had gone through a chemical bath inside a canister.

I pulled the strip from the canister and once it had dried, I took it over to the drafting table, waxed the back, and pressed it down on cardboard. Then using a T-square and an X-acto knife, I cut the various segments of type apart and rearranged them on a layout template to try to make a pleasing looking presentation of artwork for you to approve. Then the job moved forward as described, until it was packaged and ready to go.

After Printing Unlimited shut down in 1986, I missed doing typesetting and layout work so much that I purchased my own Editwriter, a heavy machine with a monitor, an electronic keyboard, and a steel body – roughly the size of an upright piano. I leased a room in Cherry Creek North from a place called The Dot, who did camera work and made metal plates for those in the industry who didn’t have their own in-house equipment. Being next door to them helped immensely, because many of their customers began coming to me to do their typesetting and layout. In addition to printers, my clients included several Re/Max agents, Ilona of Hungary, and Schlosser Equipment Company, for whom I made up a 50-page catalog.

After three years, I moved my equipment home and worked out of my house until 1999, when the ubiquitous PC finally put me out of business. I miss being a typesetter. It was the best job I’d ever had!