

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



When I was in medical school, one method of studying I used involved writing questions on one side of a 3" x 5" index card and putting the answers on the other side. Then, I would quiz myself. I scribbled thousands of these cards, to the point that I became bored with my own handwriting. So, I purchased two Osmiroid italic fountain pens—one all black, the other green and black—and taught myself to write calligraphy. I filled one pen with black ink, a color that I eventually abandoned, and the other with brown, which remains my distinctive color to this day. As a house officer, I would write the headings of the sections of my patient notes in black, and the text in brown such that when I encountered subsequent trainees they knew me from my patient records.

A few years after I moved to Maryland in the mid-1980s, I decided to buy a pen and a bottle of ink. So, I hunted through the Yellow Pages and located a pen shop called Pen Haven in Kensington, Maryland, just a couple of miles from my house. It was only open on weekends, so I drove over one Saturday afternoon. As soon as I entered this rather small shop, I was struck by case after case of beautiful pens like I had never seen before. I was greeted by the proprietor, Bert Heiserman, an extremely friendly chap of my age who not only sold me what I needed, but started me on an adventure that has lasted to this day. His shop was abounding with his specialty, vintage writing instruments and related ephemera. I began asking questions about the pens and he responded with enthusiasm, providing elaborate, educational answers. I returned regularly and noted that there were many others who did the same, and it was sort of like a club.

Not only did I buy pens at Pen Haven, my wife and I started going to antique shops and flea markets in our area as well as in Adamstown, Pennsylvania (I think of it as *Pen-sylvania*), Brimfield, Massachusetts, and elsewhere. While she roamed around looking for whatever struck her fancy, I scoured the booths for pens and generally emerged with a few that looked interesting. I didn't know what I was buying early on, so I would bring my finds to Bert who would examine them, tell me what they were worth, and give me a history lesson on each piece. It turned out that he was one of the world's foremost experts in the field. But he told me that, since there were so many

varieties out there, I needed to focus on a limited number of brands of pens to be a true collector. That way I could become a sort of expert myself, rather than being a dilettante. He recommended Conklin pens because they were unique and relatively uncommon.

Over the ensuing years I began to amass an impressive collection of Conklins, as well as a few other brands. Initially my wife thought, what's the harm—how much space can a few pens take? Hah! In came the cases, the posters, and the lamp, which now dominate my study.

Pen collecting is a pursuit that I have enjoyed for decades. I go to the annual Washington D.C. Fountain Pen Supershow in Vienna, Virginia, and ensure that our summer vacations don't interfere with the date. The event is like a reunion of old friends, with Bert's booth always right up front. Unfortunately, following a lengthy illness, Bert passed away in late June. At the funeral were numerous pen buddies paying their final respects to our friend and mentor. Last night I made my final pilgrimage to the shop to pick up some pens that he was trying to sell for me; the shop will be closing next month. I was sad that Bert was gone and that a special niche in my life was now empty.

However, my interest in writing instruments appears to have infected others as well. My patients frequently ask to see my pens and we chat about them. I often give pens as gifts to good friends and family. What I have observed lately is particularly gratifying: I have fellows who have started to buy fountain pens (even filling them with ink from a bottle, as I do!) and give them to each other as presents. Notably, their pen of choice seems to be a reproduction of an old Conklin Crescent Filler (Mark Twain's favorite pen because it could not roll off the table, thus preventing him from cursing, as the story goes), which comes with an italic nib.

If I have staved off the infernal texting in some young people and infused them with enthusiasm for the written word, I feel like I have accomplished something that Bert would have been proud of.

Until next month ...

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bruce D. Cheson". The ink is a dark brown color, matching the brown ink mentioned in the text. The signature is written on a light-colored background.

Bruce D. Cheson, MD