

# Classics

There's a maxim, variously attributed to Herblock and Russell Baker, among others, that says, "If it works well, they'll stop making it." True enough, but this doesn't mean that the market for well-made discontinued products has dried up. On the contrary, vintage goods ranging from bulky press cameras to "tail-dragger" airplanes have remained in demand long after the last ones were made. What follows is a selection of these products for which the demand is so great that most command a higher price now than they did when new. They are classics.

What makes a product a classic?

Three things in particular: simplicity of design, sex appeal and, most of all, *quality*. Classics are rarely the most compact or automatic of products, but their lack of all the latest features only adds to their mystique; there's less to go wrong. Even when partly broken, these items limp along. Classics are the masochists of hardware, built to take abuse.

Classic products are medium-tech goods, and proud of it. In a pinch, they can be fixed by the user. Gay Talese, for example, has used dental floss to hold loose keys of his Olivetti typewriter in place. Andy Rooney went so far as to get a service manual from his dealer so he could maintain his Underwood No. 5 himself.

Neither of these typewriters is electric. The last manual typewriter of any kind was made in this country six years ago. One reason such machines are still treasured is that they make sense; you can see how they work. One develops an understanding not only of such a piece of equipment but *with* it as well.

It helps that many of these products come from an era when sensuous curves were considered attractive in both women and design. This is where sex appeal comes in. The shapely lines of a Les Paul guitar or a vintage Marantz component such as the model 10B tuner invite intimacy. The fact that the 10B uses vacuum tubes only enhances its allure to some audiophiles. In their eyes, tubes not only have a nice rounded look, they're easy to troubleshoot as well (remember tube-testers at the grocery store?). But most important is that to certain ears, tubes produce a warmer, more intimate sound than do transistors, which is why many tube-type components command a premium price today.

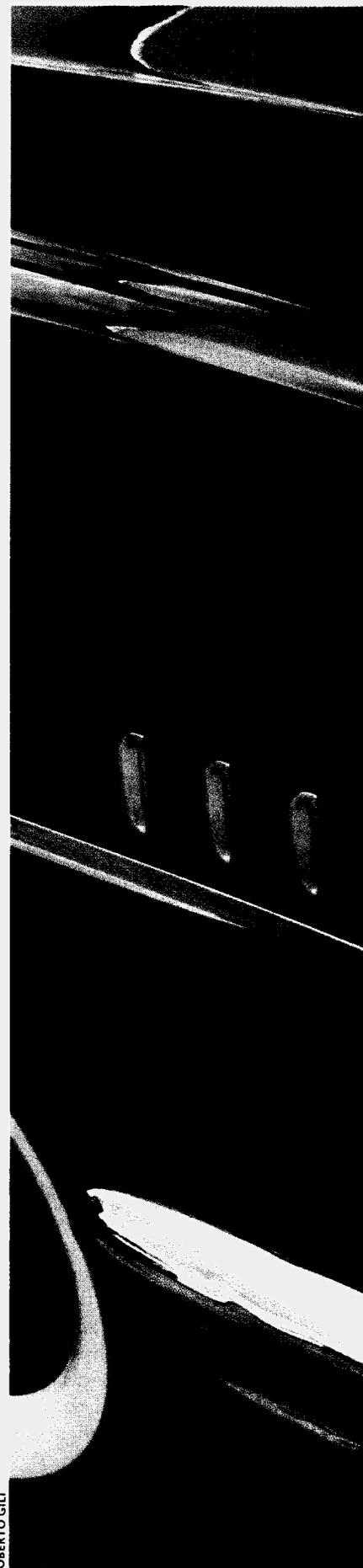
**By Ralph Keyes**

The appeal of a classic usually involves more than a little nostalgia. We develop powerful attachments to what served us well when our passion was greatest. According to Cliff Lawrence, founder of the Pen Fanciers Club, a key factor in today's fountain-pen renaissance is "people trying to recapture their youth." Prized vintage products tend to reflect the age of those who prize them. Cars from the Fifties appeal more to men who are now in their forties, those from the Sixties to men in their thirties.

Over time, classics adapt to those who use them; they begin to reflect the user's personality. Some owners are so smitten they have been known to spend hundreds, even thousands of dollars maintaining their objects of desire. This is not user-friendliness; this is romance.

---

*Ralph Keyes is a Philadelphia-based free-lance writer. He is the proud owner of a Minolta 101.*



OBERTO GILL



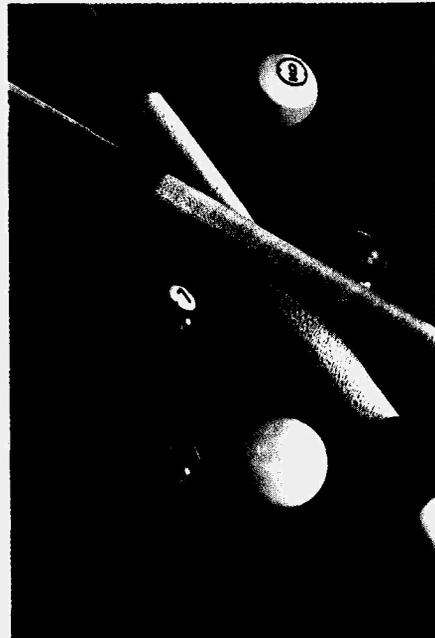
## The '57 Bel Air

**WHEN BILL MARTIN WAS A** high-school senior, '57 Chevies were tearing up the drag strips around his Glen Burnie, Maryland, home. Martin yearned for one—but couldn't afford to drive anything other than his father's '53 Olds.

Things are different now. Martin, 48, owns a lucrative mobile-home business, ten '57 Chevies, two from '55 and a couple of vintage Corvettes. The prize of his collection is a red '57 Bel Air restored with original parts—and considered by some to be the best mid-Fifties Chevrolet in existence.

Up to a fifth of the 5 million Chevies made between 1955 and 1957 escaped the crusher. Perhaps one half of those are still registered. They are by far the most popular vintage cars. The looks, performance and durability of these Chevies are legendary. Whatever they lack in power-aided gadgets or microchips only adds to their appeal. And you don't need the skills of a contortionist to work on a mid-Fifties Chevy. Because there's so much space around the engine, legend has it that a '55 Chevrolet was once intercepted at the Mexican border with two illegal aliens under the hood.

After a tense day at work Bill Martin likes to retreat to the converted barn where he stores his cars, put on a Buddy Holly tape and tinker under the hood of a Chevy. "It's just the cars and me out there," he says. "It takes me back in time."

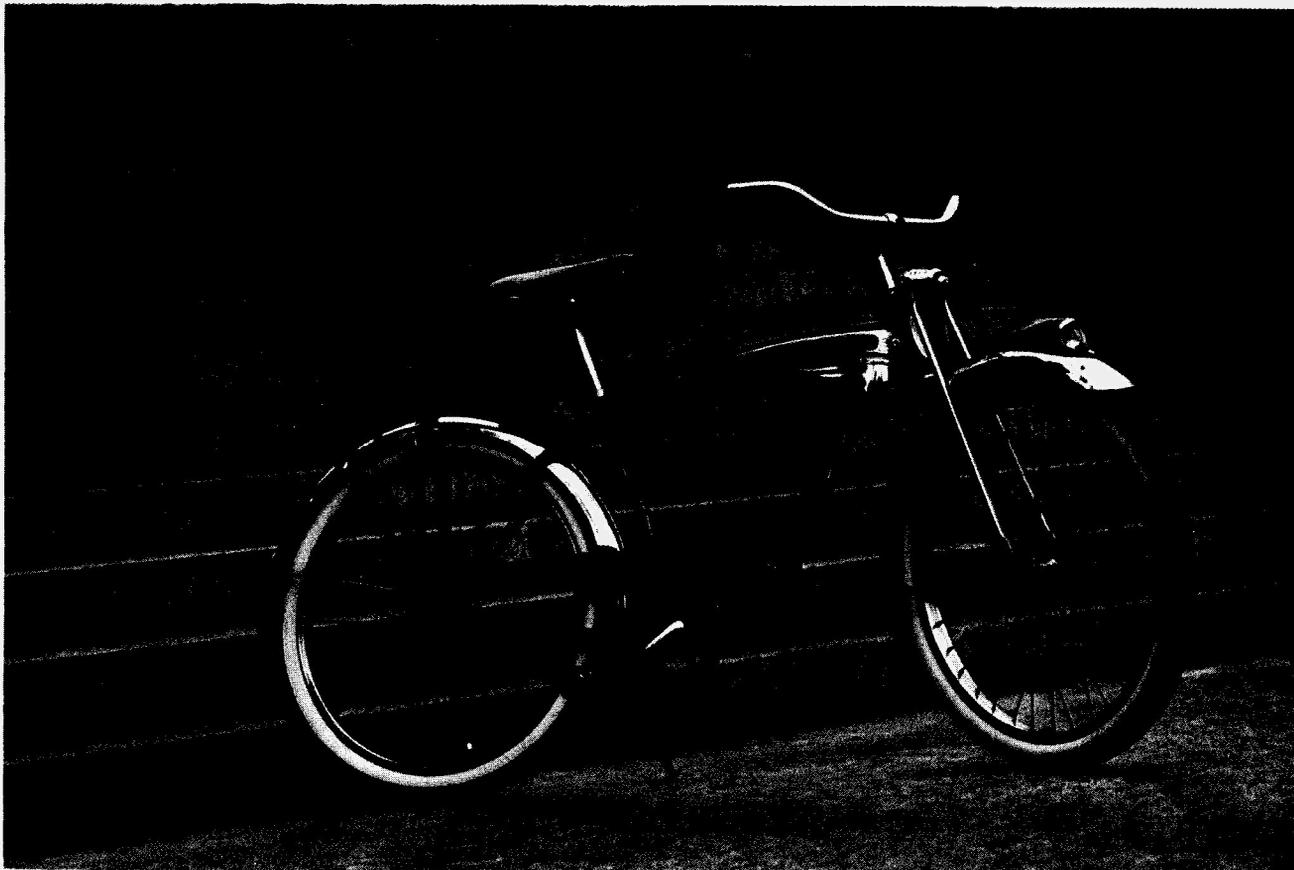


## The Balabushka

**SINCE GETTING STAR BILLING** in *The Color of Money*, the Balabushka has taken on a mythic mystique. Originally selling in the low hundreds, these pool cues now go for sums in the low to mid thousands. Cue maker Dan Janes of Towson, Maryland, reports getting an offer from a Japanese trading company that wanted to buy Balabushkas at any reasonable price. With such demand, by Janes's estimate, the ratio of counterfeit to real Balabushkas is now four to one.

At the time of his death, in 1975, George Balabushka was America's premier custom cue maker. The shafts of his cues were made from straight-grain maple, the butts from ebony and rosewood. Some were inlaid with jewels, tooled leather, Irish linen and, in one case, card markings. Each cue was handcrafted on a simple lathe in his garage workshop. A slow, painstaking worker, Balabushka made perhaps two cues a week, each designed specifically for the shooter's needs. As word spread about this wondrous pool cue, mail orders piled up. The best way to get a genuine "Bushka" was to make a pilgrimage to Balabushka's Brooklyn garage. Pool players Willie Mosconi and Larry Lisciotti did. So did Steve Mizerak, who still uses his. Like many, Mizerak calls the Balabushka the Stradivarius of pool cues.

According to Janes, the cue Newman and Cruise used in *The Color of Money* was actually a "Joss 18" made by Janes. Evidently the producers didn't want to risk breaking the real thing.



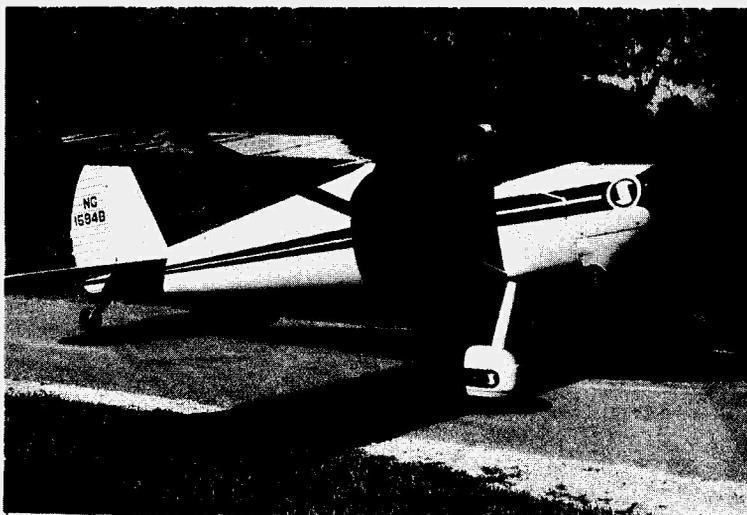
## The Phantom

**CURTIS ANTHONY** runs his hand gently over the frame of his thirty-one-year-old Schwinn Phantom. "The lines on it are great," says the 30-year-old bike restorer. "The lines of a wing; curvature carried through the whole bicycle." His fingers trace the arc of the rear chrome fender, pat the plump midsection, hesitate at its horn button, skip across the fork spring, then descend along the front light's gentle curve. "Notice the slope of the headlight. It looks a bit like a [Raymond] Loewy design."

Schwinn always seemed to know what American boys wanted. In the Fifties, that meant two-tone muscular bicycles that looked as though they could take any other bike on the block. Schwinn's weren't built for speed, not with their bloated tires and hefty steel frames. These bikes were meant to swagger, not dash.

Schwinn stopped making the Phantom in 1959, but because of their nostalgic appeal and because so many remain in good condition, they dominate the vintage-bike market. A well-preserved Phantom can bring about \$2,000 today.

When Anthony takes one out for a spin on the streets around his Philadelphia home, he notices a change in the faces he passes, the grins of recognition. He feels a change, too. "I slow down, I relax," says Anthony. "It makes me feel like a kid."



## The Luscombe

**IN 1946, WILLIAM TINKLER'S** airplane hit some hidden telegraph wires. Though the plane was demolished, its cockpit remained intact, and its pilot lived to fly another day.

The plane was a Luscombe. A single-engine "tail-dragger," the Luscombe was the first light airplane with an all-metal fuselage. Nearly a third of the approximately 6,000 Luscombes produced between 1938 and 1949 are still registered. A Luscombe today costs three to four times its original price of about \$3,000.

The Luscombe NC 1594B—built in May 1948—is owned by Bill Tinkler. "I love flying that little airplane," says Tinkler, now retired after twenty-six years as a United Airlines pilot. "Even though it's that old, the Luscombe has a very strong airframe." Its aerodynamic design helps the Luscombe cruise at about 120 miles per hour. With an added capacity for radio communication, the plane's range is limited only by the pilot's will. To celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of scheduled through-airmail service, in 1984, Tinkler and his wife flew the twin-seater from Newark, New Jersey, to San Francisco and back, following directions for visual navigation in a 1921 post-office pilot's guide. "I have had several people ask if I'm ready to sell the airplane," says Tinkler. "I tell them I'll only be ready to sell it when I lose my certification and can no longer fly."

# Classics

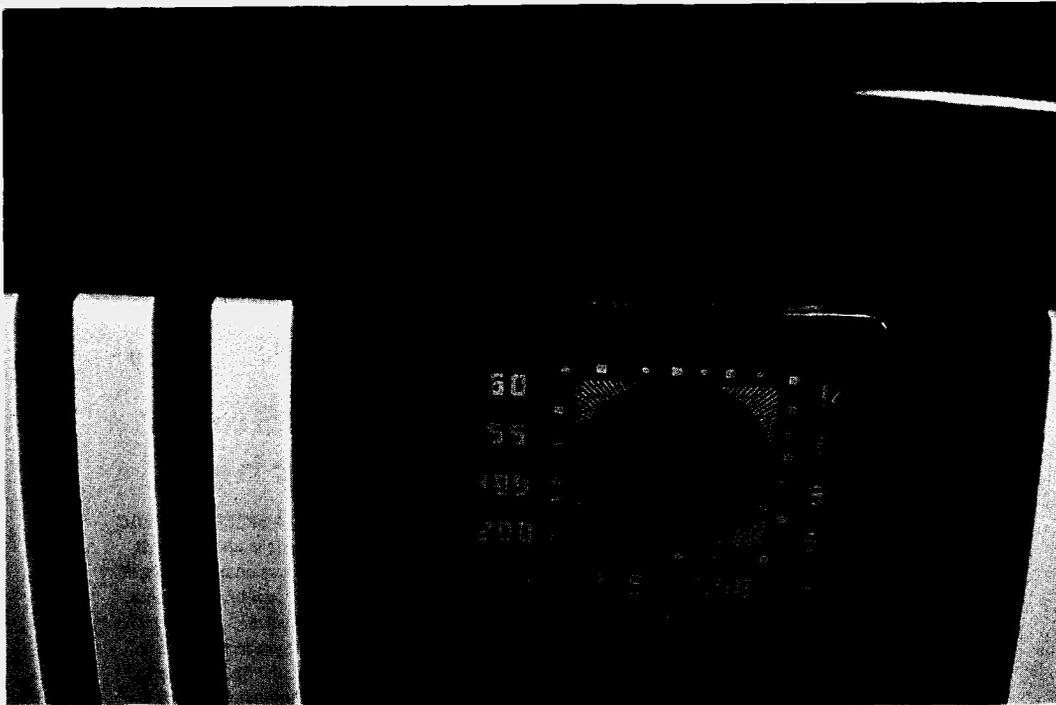
## The Speed Graphic

**HEFTING A SPEED GRAPHIC** camera by its leather side belt, you can easily imagine yourself shouting, "Just one more shot, Miss Hayworth!" Until smaller cameras began to replace it in the 1950s, the Speed Graphic was the American camera for the press. "Speeds" photographed the burning Hindenburg, Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima and the torrid New York City of Weegee. The last Speed Graphic was made in 1973.

Today, it's being rediscovered. Demand for the crispness and detail of its four-by-five negatives has grown. So has respect for the Speed Graphic's nearly indestructible fold-up case. This camera was made to survive flying shrapnel, the spray of tidal waves and the heat of fires. Outdoor photographers in particular appreciate the Graphic's virtues in remote locations, where toughness is valued in both men and equipment.

Speed Graphics can still be found in their original \$200-to-\$300 price range because their very durability makes a huge supply available. Many photographers find them awkward to use, but to others, that's part of their appeal. Half the fun of using a Speed is assuming the "press photographer's slouch," says George Browder of Crystal River, Florida. "It just looks more authoritative than a 35 millimeter," he adds. "If someone's using that camera, it's like, 'They must know what they're doing.'"





## The FADA Streamliner

**IN 1984, THE MURIEL KARASIK GALLERY** in New York City displayed radios from the Thirties and Forties. Most were made of Catalin, a resin-based plastic with luscious, almost surreal colors. "I was totally captivated," says Ken Smith of the exhibit. "I had never seen such colors, other than in a Van Gogh painting."

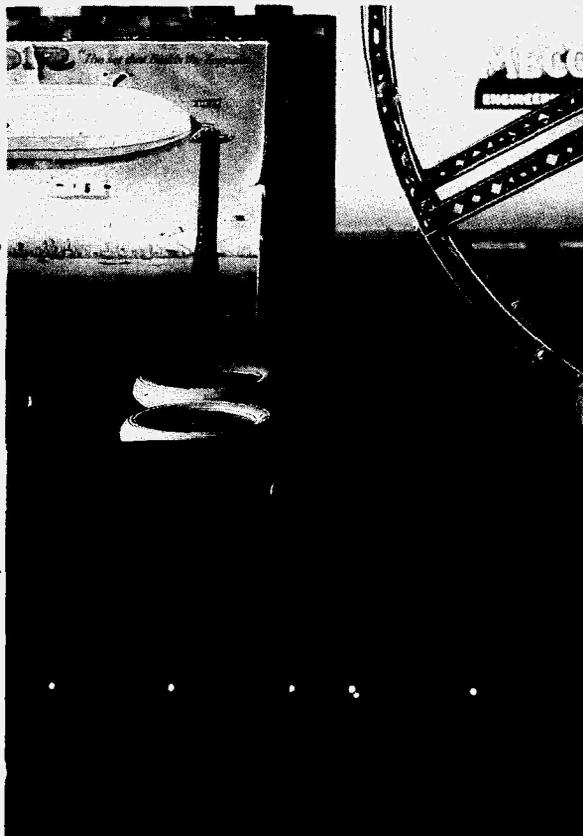
Smith, 43, who designs offices, now owns fifty-five Catalin radios. Eight of them are FADA Streamliners, an Art Deco model that is widely considered a design classic. "Sensual is the best word to describe it," he says. Streamliners, which cost less than \$30 in the Forties, now bring up to \$1,000. The value of old radios in general is soaring—and not just because of their good looks. Those with large speakers in big wood cabinets have a full, rich tone, and smaller radios made of Bakelite plastic produce an unusually resonant sound. "You get more of a feel for a talk-show host's personality from an old radio," says Carol Rosenthal, who owns five models in wood cabinets. She finds that AM stations sound better on radios produced before the advent of FM. Rosenthal also likes their dials. Just turning on her RCA console bathes her Manhattan apartment with a comforting red glow, which suggests a warm little hearth. Old radios don't just produce sound; they produce atmosphere.

## The Erector Set

**AT AN ANTIQUE SHOW** seven years ago, Ted Howard noticed a 1931 Erector Set. It reminded him of ones he'd played with in the early Fifties. Howard bought it and has acquired many more since. The 41-year-old New Jersey banker now owns more than 1,000 vintage Erector Sets.

Unlike today's plastic-and-stamped-metal version, the die-cast Erector Sets made from 1913 to 1963 had weight. Their trademark lattice girders (prewar versions were nickel-plated) were used to build models ranging from a zeppelin to a truck you could actually sit in. Joel Perlin, 42, a Santa Barbara, California, car dealer points out that the fenders of those trucks were made of heavier-gauge steel than the fenders on some actual trucks today.

Perlin's interest in Erector Sets revived in 1984, when he could find nothing comparable to give his 7-year-old son. Perlin now heads an international club of Erectorphiles. One Pennsylvania member constructed a room-size Ferris wheel. Perlin filled his own den with a parachute jump. A legendary builder in New Jersey erected a twelve-foot derrick in his foyer. Ted Howard has so far limited himself to building two modest-size locomotives, but he dreams of building the biggest Erector Ferris wheel ever. In the meantime, he's busy tracking down more sets. There are still about ten he doesn't own.

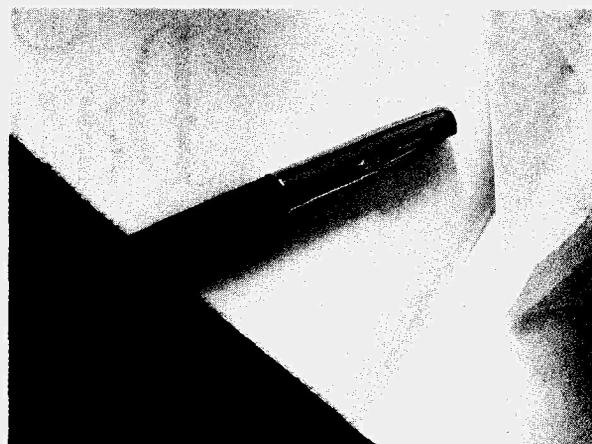


OBERTO GILI

## The Remette

**WHEN HARRISON E. SALISBURY** was about to leave for China four years ago, a friend gave him an electric typewriter to take along. It was light, compact and had a nice, soft touch. Salisbury put it on a shelf. Instead, the veteran New York Times correspondent took his Remette, a Remington portable he'd been issued by UPI in 1942 (the last year it was made). As he retraced the 7,400-mile route of Mao Zedong's Long March, his Remette survived dust, rain and a fall from a jeep. Salisbury is not alone in treasuring an old manual. Manhattan's Martin Tytell has also sold and serviced such typewriters for Andy Rooney, David Brinkley, Charles Kuralt and Richard Condon, among others. Tytell says he has no trouble selling refurbished prewar Remington portables at seven times their original price of \$50. "There's something about this machine that writers love," he says. "It's compact, has a firm touch and will take a tremendous beating."

Like many correspondents, Salisbury has difficulty writing on anything but a battered portable. "I'm one of those people who like to bang a typewriter. I can bang away with it on my knees. After forty-six years it's sort of an extension of my hands."



## The Parker 51

**ONCE A DAY**, on the average, someone asks for a Parker 51 fountain pen at FPH Stationery in New York City. "They love that pen," says co-owner Terry Wiederlight. "We sell all of them we can get," adds his brother Steve.

Getting them is the problem. Parker stopped producing this pen in 1978. Used 51s—which generally cost under \$20 when new—today command \$60 to \$1,200 and are the most sought-after vintage pens among those who want to write, not collect.

When it was introduced in 1941, the 51 pen was considered state-of-the-art. Some think it still is. The Pen Fanciers Club in Dunedin, Florida, restores twenty to thirty Parker 51s a month. Members appreciate the plastic hood that protects the supple gold nib, the ample reservoir and the fact that the pen is virtually leakproof and uses quick-drying ink. Its fabled durability made it popular among soldiers during World War II. Ike himself used one. So did General Douglas MacArthur when he signed the peace treaty ending the war with Japan.

A poll of leading designers, artists and architects once judged this pen to be among history's five most successfully designed products. "It reminds me of a [Jaguar] XKE," says one aficionado. "It should be in the Museum of Modern Art."

