

Shaeffer

**Classic and modern vintage fountain pens.
Period 1970 - 1919**

Sheaffer pens

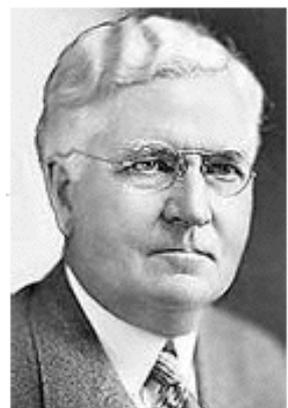


Sheaffer's Plant #1 in Fort Madison, c 1920 (courtesy Pendemonium)

Sheaffer was one of the "Big Four" American penmakers of the classic era, and is probably the only one that today survives in anything close to its original configuration (at least for now). Although they have changed ownership a few times (and are currently owned by Bic), they continue to design and manufacture the majority of their pens (and, until recently, their Skrip brand fountain pen ink) in their Iowa complex. They were, and remain, a rather conservative operation that was nevertheless capable of frequent stylistic and technical brilliance, and have always offered reliable pens of solid value. The company has a long and rich history full of technical firsts, innovative design, and business success.

The beginning

Walter A. Sheaffer was born in Bloomfield, Iowa in 1867, the son of a local jeweler. He learned the jewelry trade himself, and shortly after the turn of the century took over a shop in Fort Madison, Iowa, deep in the U.S. Midwest, along the banks of the Mississippi river (where you can currently find the retail storefront of Pendemonium in the old downtown district). In 1907, apparently inspired by perusal of advertisements for the Conklin self-filler, Sheaffer began work on his own unique fountain pen design, incorporating a rubber ink sac that filled by means of a convenient side lever. By the next year, he had his first patent, and by 1912, with help from two former associates of the Conklin company, Sheaffer took the bull by the horns and invested his life savings into converting his jewelry shop into a pen factory.



Starting with a workforce of seven people (including his young son Craig, who was in charge

of making the all-important levers), Sheaffer expanded and took new space in and around Fort Madison, and by the 1950s (at the peak of its influence in the industry) had more than a thousand people on its payroll. The early years of the company are often portrayed by chroniclers as a period of dramatic legal struggle as tiny Sheaffer sought to defend its patents against one attack after another, often from much larger and more well-established penmakers. One famous story has it that W.A. Sheaffer, in New York City on legal business, was forced to dodge a private detective by hopping on a subway train, and then immediately hopping off again as the doors closed. Certainly the sailing was anything but smooth for the young company; even one of Sheaffer's original ex-Conklin partners, George Kraker, broke off and began manufacturing Sheaffer-like pens in Kansas City under his own name (Sheaffer's lawyers soon put a stop to that, too).

Was the lever filler superior to the other self-fillers of the day? You can start quite an argument on this topic (and you can read more about the lever and its competitors [elsewhere on my site](#)), but clearly the public of the 1910s thought so, since Sheaffer's sales grew rapidly in the years through the First World War (Lambrou in [FPOTW](#) observes that Sheaffer's sales grew at five times the rate of the rest of the industry). Also, the competition must have thought so too, since they risked Sheaffer's frequently deployed patent infringement suits to come out with their own versions of the system (Waterman's lever filler, for example, used a "lever box" in place of the pln, exploiting an apparent loophole in the Sheaffer patents).

Sheaffer was to learn what nearly all modern inventors now know: that a patent is not an absolute protection for your good ideas, but is at best a delaying action to keep the competition at bay until you can move on to the next big innovation. The Sheaffer lever filler went on to become the standard of the industry, soldiering on long after even Sheaffer themselves had dropped them in the early 1950s. Even arch-rival Parker, normally preferring its own button and Vacumatic systems, featured a couple of lever fillers here and there among its low-priced products.

Up through the mid-1920s, the Sheaffer range consisted of pens in the standard tubular or "flat top" shape, in various girths and lengths, made mostly from black hard rubber (some red hard rubber pens were also made). Sheaffer developed its own attractive chasing patterns for these pens. Engravable wide cap bands and factory overlays in silver, gold fill, and solid gold were also available (as one might expect from a pen made by a jeweler). Sheaffer also made twist propel/repel pencils to go with their pens, and also briefly sold low-priced gold-pointed pens under the Craig sub-brand (named for Craig Sheaffer).

Sheaffer brought its gold point production in-house in the late 1910s (where it has remained down to this day, making use of a special gold alloy known as "Sheaffer Gold").

In those early days, the pocket clip was just beginning to appear as a standard fixture of the fountain pen, rather than an optional add-on; Sheaffer's clips were attractive and substantial; they were internally sprung inside the top of the cap, so they could not be pulled out or popped loose like other riveted clips of the period.

With the high quality and clever levers of Sheaffer's first products having established it as a major force in the industry, the company was ready to break new ground. We'll now look at a few of Sheaffer's innovations over the following decades.

Lifetime warranty

The pens of the first couple of decades of the 20th century were rather expensive (much the same in relative terms as the modern PDA). Yet they did not enjoy a surpassingly good reputation for reliability. In particular, the delicately-thin gold points were easily bent or sprung, and their nibs were often easily scratched or snapped off altogether.



Sheaffer Lifetime "Flat-Top" in Jet Black Radite, c. 1925. The White Dot is visible at the end of the cap.

Sheaffer determined to address this perception head on by creating a pen that was even more expensive, but that carried a nearly unconditional lifetime guarantee. The "Lifetime" pen, as it was called, went on sale in about 1920 for prices starting at \$8.75 -- twice or more what Sheaffer asked for comparable non- Lifetime models (and more even than the Parker Duofold, which went on sale the next year, and carried a of "only" 25 years). Despite this steep price, the Lifetime became a best-seller; Sheaffer guessed, correctly, that buyers would appreciate the superior value of an expensive pen that would outlast any number of less-expensive junkers.

Perhaps in order to ensure that those Lifetime points wouldn't be coming back to the factory very often, Sheaffer made them of heavy-gauge gold, and tipped them with very hard iridium mined from the Urals (and later from the South Pacific). This gave the Lifetime (and future Sheaffer pens) the writing characteristics for which they're so well known today: Sheaffers almost uniformly have very firm points with smooth writing nibs (even in fine point models), capable of doing manifolding duty (for writing through the multipart carbon business forms that were common in those days). So, don't look to an old Sheaffer to provide the sort of willowy, supple point that most people associate with vintage fountain pens (although you can find the occasional flex point on a Sheaffer). Interestingly, the two features that most collectors associate with the Lifetime pen -- the White Dot and the serially-numbered point -- actually did not begin to appear until later in the 1920s. Both of these were carried on until government pressure forced Sheaffer and other manufacturers to rein in extravagant warranty offers; thereafter, the White Dot survived as a hallmark for Sheaffer's higher-line pens in general, and eventually became (as today) the corporate trademark. Both Parker and Wahl-Eversharp also adopted similar markings for their senior pens (the blue diamond and the double-checkmark, respectively).

Radite plastic

Up through the mid-1920s, you could have had your fountain pen in any color you liked -- so long as it was black or red or some mixture of the two (Waterman and others figured out how to make hard rubber pens with bluish or olive tints, but these are quite rare).

In 1924, after some years of experimentation, Sheaffer offered its "Radite" pens to the public.

These were made from celluloid resin (derived from plant fiber), and came in two colors: solid black and marbled jade green (other colors would be added in profusion as the years went by). In addition to having better color, these pens were also more resistant to breakage and tarnishing than were hard rubber models.

The pens were made from rods or tubes of cured colored celluloid, which were cut to shape, lathed, and painstakingly hand-polished to a high luster.

Studio 29 Pen box

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The plastic Lifetime pens cost the same \$8.75 as their hard-rubber forebears; hard-rubber pens would continue to be manufactured into the latter 1920s alongside the colorful new models.

Sheaffer Lifetime in Jade Green Radite, c1925 (white dot is on top of cap).



Since Sheaffer's Radite pens were the first nationally-successful plastic pens on the market, many collectors assume that Sheaffer must have invented the idea. This isn't true. Parker made several pens of Galalith or Casein (a porous and delicate plastic derived from milk), and the short-lived but well-remembered LeBoeuf company made the first celluloid pens in about 1918 using its own patented technology. Still, as often happens with cutting-edge technology, it paid Sheaffer to be the second on the market rather than the first. Today, perhaps ironically, Sheaffer's best pens are all of metal construction.

"The Successor to Ink"

The 1920s were a busy period at Fort Madison. Along with the new Lifetime and Radite pens, Sheaffer developed its own aniline based "writing fluid," which it sold as "Skrip, the successor to ink." It could be that Sheaffer wanted to banish the bad reputation of early acidic ink formulations (which were never intended for use in fountain pens), or it could be that they just wanted a new trademark and a captive market, but in any case they took great pains for many years to avoid using the term "ink" in connection with Skrip.



Assortment of Sheaffer Skrip ink bottles and other accessories from the 1950s to the 2000s. The brick in the shot was rescued by Sam and Frank Fiorella from the 2002 demolition of the old Sheaffer Plant #1 in Fort Madison (see top of page). The "conical" bottle on the right end of the brick is the new Slovenianmade Skrip bottle, which no longer has the dip-well.

In the 1930s, Sheaffer began to sell Skrip in the trademark dip-well bottle, which survived in its original form until the end of the century (making it one of the longest-produced bits of pen ephemera in history).

People used lots of ink in those days, so Skrip came in four-ounce, pint, and quart bottles as well as the two-ounce bottles more commonly seen today. The big bottles were designed not to fill pens, but to fill inkwells; they had a clever spout cap that made such filling mess-free.

The range of colors was surprisingly varied for the day, and included both "permanent" red, black, and blue-black, as well as "washable" shades in such unusual and legendary colors as Persian Rose (which some modern ink makers have striven to duplicate).

The Balance

In 1929, Sheaffer introduced the taper-ended Balance, which set another industry trend for "streamlined" pens, and was literally the shape of Sheaffers to come for the next four decades. More marbled and mottled colors were offered in the '30s, along with snazzy striated solid/pearlescent finishes. Clips evolved from "old timey" ball end types to the sleek, rigid, internally sprung types of the 40s and 50s. Sheaffer continued to offer flat-top pens during much of this period, and often sold pens with pointy Balance caps and flatbottom barrels. These are sometimes called "transitional pens," although there's evidence to suggest that these pens were listed in the Sheaffer catalog and were offered (along with the flat-tops) long after Balance production was firmly established. Balance pens with elongated, black tails (sometimes with little balls at the end) were sold as "telephone dialers;" these were a useful aid in those days before touch-tone buttons and speed dial.



You could get Balance pens in many sizes, colors, and trim levels, but collectors generally just call them all "Balances" since Sheaffer wasn't known for using discrete or prominent model names for their products during these years. There were, however, some notable exceptions to the "no-names" policy, as you can read elsewhere. Over the model run, Sheaffer updated the style and technology of the Balance in such a gradual fashion that you can only appreciate the differences when you put early and late pens side-by-side.



*Sheaffer Balance pens, c 1929 (top) and c 1942 (bottom)
Note "amberizing" of the barrel on the older pen, which cannot be cleaned up.*

The 1930s were, of course, years of economic depression. No penmaker could really afford to get along just catering to the rich, and Sheaffer was no exception. However, Sheaffer preferred not to dilute its brand name and instead sold cut-price pens under the Wasp imprint (for "Walter A. Sheaffer Pen"). These had more of a flat-top shape and used more varied and colorful plastics than their richer siblings (it's pretty common to see the wilder plastic colors among the less expensive pens of this period, color presumably being a major draw when you couldn't offer the best points and trim). The Wasp Addipoint model was very similar to the Esterbrook J, down to the user-replacable points (which came in solid 12k gold as well as steel). W. A. Sheaffer retired as president in 1938 in favor of his son Craig, who ran the firm through the difficult wartime years.

W. A. Sheaffer remained active in company affairs until his death in 1946

New fillers

Sheaffer's first departure from the old faithful lever filler came in 1935 with the introduction of the sacless Vac-Fil models, which were sold alongside the more conventional lever fillers (Sheaffer had introduced this plunger-fill system in its Wasp brand the year before).

These pens worked on the same vacuum plunger principle as the Onoto. Sheaffer marketing materials pointed out smugly that the Vac-Fil, unlike Parker's popular Vacumatic, was truly a "sacless" pen since the Parker pen used an inverted rubber sac for a pressure diaphragm (which presents the same risk of hardening and splitting as a full sac), and also informed salesmen that the Vac-Fil had up to 400% greater ink capacity (well, maybe potential ink capacity) than competitive models.

After WWII, two more new filing systems were introduced (both, curiously, sac based), the Touchdown and Snorkel fillers. The Touchdown filler, like the Vac-Fil, filled on the downstroke, but used a pneumatic or "overpressure" principle rather than the vacuum principle of the Vac-Fil.

The Snorkel was similar, to the Touchdown, but included an ingenious snorkel tube that extended from under the point, allowing you to fill then pen without having to wipe it up afterward.



A very early three-way writing set from the early 1950s: a touchdown filler pen, a Stratowriter ballpoint, and a propelling pencil.

Both of these pens could trace their technology back to the Chilton pen of the 1920s and 30s. These systems saw Sheaffer through to the very late '50s, by which time the switch to cartridge filling was well underway. The modern disposable ink cartridge was an invention of the French firm JiF-Waterman, and made its way to U.S. Waterman pens in the early 1950s with the C/F series. Sheaffer released its first cartridge pens in the low-priced Fineline series in about 1955. In those days, you had to make a commitment to cartridges, since Sheaffer did not offer a bottle-fill converter until the end of the decade (and its improved "squeeze filler" converter did not arrive until the late 1960s). Although all new Sheaffer pens of the 1960s (and beyond) were available as cartridge fillers, you could still find Touchdown-filler Imperial models well into the 1970s.

Triumph and Inlaid points

If the Vac-Fil was an answer to Parker's Vacumatic, the conical Triumph point of 1942 was clearly a nod toward Parker's 51, helping Sheaffer's lineup look a bit less old-fashioned when compared to the sleek new Parker. The Triumph point was also a much stronger part than the conventional point, and continued the Sheaffer tradition of rigid and smooth writing. The elegant Inlaid point made its first appearance on the Pen for Men (PFM) of 1959, and has been found at the top of the Sheaffer line ever since.

Sheaffer ballpoints

Sheaffer's first ballpoint pen, the RA-1 Stratowriter, made its debut in 1946, shortly after Eversharp and Reynolds clashed over the new technology.

In those days, the ballpoint pen was a bit of high-tech exotica, not at all the ho-hum disposable item we see today. It offered a longer write-out between fillings than either pencils or fountain pens, and was easier to refill and left more permanent marks on the paper. It's promised ability to write underwater became grist for the radio comedian's mill ("Who needs to write underwater?"), and at least one feature film was based on the ballyhoo that accompanied ballpoint pen promotion of the mid-1940s. Many manufacturers treated ballpoints more as a kind of "ink pencil" than a pen, and these early ballpoints usually sold for far more than the makers' fountain pens.

Sheaffer, for its part, gave the Stratowriter all-metal construction and a style that was quite distinct from its fountain pens. At \$15.00 for the gold-fill entry-level model, the Stratowriter was half again as much as you might pay for a typical gold-pointed White Dot Sheaffer of the time. Refills cost \$1.00 (close to \$10 in today's funds), and (according to ad copy of the day) your Sheaffer dealer would be happy to install them for you.

Later in the 1940s the Stratowriter was restyled to harmonize with Sheaffer's other pens and pencils, and began to appear in pen-pencil-ballpoint sets. Although "Stratowriter" disappeared as a separate nameplate in the 1950s, Sheaffer continued to use the Stratowriter-style refills in its ballpoints until about 1955, when an improved ballpoint cartridge was introduced (which remains in production to this day).

Thin Model (1950s)

The dramatically slender Thin Model or "TM" pen made its bow in about 1950; it would become the vehicle for the new Snorkel filler that appeared in 1952. These pens were the core of Sheaffer's 1950s pen line, which for the first time included non-gold points (palladium-silver Triumph points for some midline models, steel or palladium-silver open points for less expensive models). Also, all of the TM models (and some of their predecessors) were made from a new, lower-cost cast plastic called Fortical rather than the charming and hand-finished celluloid which had earned the company so much fame. Heretofore, Sheaffer had been very careful not to dilute its flagship brand with such economizing, but times and tastes were changing.

Sheaffer's success during these years led to Craig Sheaffer's departure as President in 1956, in order to serve in the Eisenhower administration as an Assistant Secretary of Commerce. He was succeeded at the company by Walter Sheaffer II, and he died in 1961.

PFM and Imperial (1960s and 1970s)

In 1959, Sheaffer reversed its own trend toward slender writing instruments with the PFM (Pen for Men).

This was a stout pen that featured the trusty snorkel filler and the new Inlaid point, along with Sheaffer's first slip-cap design in a high-line pen. The PFM was apparently not the commercial success that Sheaffer had hoped, but it remained in the line through 1968 and is now the most highly-prized of postwar Sheaffer pens.

The Imperial line was a reflection of the PFM's style, and came in many price and style variations; it remained in production through 1976 and was briefly revived in the 1990s.



Sheaffer PFM V, c 1959

At the other end of the price scale from the PFM and Imperial, but well-known to most Americans who were grade-school students in those years, was Sheaffer's line of school pens; these were decidedly plain cartridge pens with nickel-plated caps and steel points. Sheaffer updated the style (but not the guts) a few times over the years, and these pens remained in production until the late 1990s (you can occasionally still find NOS examples from dealers).

Throughout its history, Sheaffer had not gone in for frequent radical design changes or profusions of different models, but this began to change in the 1960s. Sheaffer introduced many distinct models during this time, many of which ran only for a couple of years. This could simply be due to Sheaffer "bracketing its shots" to find just the right formula for a successful new pen, or it could be a reflection of the fact that pens were becoming much more of a commodity item, meant to be used for awhile, then discarded and replaced with the latest fashion.

In 1966, Sheaffer ceased to be a family-run independent company when it was sold to the diversified Textron firm. During these years, Sheaffer was teamed with Eaton, the manufacturer of stationery and business papers, and the firm was known as "Sheaffer-Eaton, a division of Textron." In 1970, Sheaffer offered a limited-production pen called the Nostalgia, which resembled an old 1910s flat top with sterling silver filigree. This was the first of many subsequent "throwback" models for Sheaffer, although it used cartridge/converter filling rather than the old-fashioned and historically-correct lever filler, and offered an 18k point rather than the traditional 14k point (a concession to modern laws in some countries that required goods advertised as "solid gold" to be at least 18k).

Targa

Sheaffer's production in the late 1970s and 1980s was dominated by the square-shouldered Targa, the first high-line Sheaffer pen in decades to depart significantly from the Balance profile. The Targa, like the Imperial, was available in basic steel-pointed models, but also came in many ornate lacquered and precious-metal finishes.

The Targa was never offered with a built-in self-filler; it used only cartridges or a converter.



*Sheaffer Targa 1005
(fluted 23k gold
electroplate) c 1985*

In other flat-top news, the famous low-priced NoNonsense pen was introduced around 1980 as a reproduction of a 1920s flat-top in appearance, complete with cap band and ball-end clip. This pen reappeared in many guises and was widely favored among buyers of imprinted promotional pens. It is still in production today as the translucent Viewpoint, the basis for Sheaffer's inexpensive calligraphy sets.

In 1988, Sheaffer-Eaton was sold again, this time to a partnership known as Gefinor..

Sheaffers in the 1990s

Sheaffer's theme for the 1990s seems to have been nostalgia. The Connaisseur (sic) was introduced in 1985; it looked like a slightly modernized 1920s flattop and was offered in a number of exotic finishes.

This pen, in various special editions, was sold well into the 1990s by the catalog retailer Levenger. The Crest model was issued in 1991; it harkened back to the TM pens of the 1950s, and had mainly metal barrels and caps (some of these had authentic celluloid barrels). The Crest had a gold Triumph point and used cartridge/converter filling. From 1995 to 1998, Sheaffer offered the Triumph Imperial, a revival of the old Imperial model now offered as a small step up from Sheaffer's workaday pens and high-line models like the Crest. The Legacy model was a reissue (at least in basic shape) of the PFM; it was a cartridge filler but, with the addition of a special converter, could be operated as a Touchdown filler. The well-received limited edition reissue of the Balance was followed by a mass-production version known as the Balance II, a gold-pointed cartridge/converter filler available in a number of marbled colors.



*Sheaffer Legacy, blue
with brushed gold
plated cap, c 2000*

In 1997, Sheaffer was acquired by BIC, the giant French manufacturer of disposable pens (and other sundries). Pen enthusiasts might have had reason to fear this event, since the last time Bic bought a U.S. penmaker (Waterman), they closed it down almost immediately. It seems, however, that BIC is interested in preserving Sheaffer as a luxury marque, although perhaps not necessarily in its original form (as you can read below).

Current offerings

The current Sheaffer line includes a number of lower priced student and workaday ballpens and pencils such as the Sentinel.

The upmarket White Dot line includes the newer Javelin and Agio models, along with doughty Prelude. While most of these pens are rather simple in design, Sheaffer focuses on offering unusual and striking new finishes for these pens.



The PFM-like Legacy carries on in the top spot, and is offered in a special sterling silver model.

Sheaffer Legacy 2 with sandblasted gold-plate cap and electric-blue barrel, c 1998

The most unusual pen in Sheaffer's line is the high-tech Intrigue, which combines the Inlaid point with postmodern styling and exotic finishes; it has an unusual filling system that can use cartridges or can work as an integrated piston filler.

Although fountain pens appear to have vanished from Sheaffer's low-priced lines (the deathless School Pens finally died around the end of the 1990s), the popular No Nonsense pen survives to this day in the popular calligraphy sets (where it is furnished with a number of interchangeable italic points).

This pen is now equipped with a translucent barrel and modernized snap-cap, and a trendy rubberized section. The latest Sheaffer model at this writing is the MPI, a ballpoint and full-width highlighter cleverly combined in the same instrument.

Whither Sheaffer?

As I noted, Sheaffer is the only one of the big four U.S. penmakers that continues to make pens in its original hometown; this, however, may soon be changing. As I write, we have the news that BIC plans to close down production in Fort Madison by 2006. This is of course very sad, but probably inevitable; Sanford has already ended Parker pen production in the U.S., and BIC recently closed down the old Sheaffer ink plant and "outsourced" all ink production to Slovenia. Indeed, I'm told that the Sheaffer payroll has declined from its peak of well over 2,000 employees in the 1950s down to something around 150 today.

The current (c 2004) Sheaffer plant, along the Mississippi river in Fort Madison.



A closure of the Fort Madison factory will be a great loss, not only to the citizens of Fort Madison, but to the world of pen enthusiasts. Inevitably, as the skilled artisans remaining at Sheaffer are mustered out, there will be no younger generation to replace them, and very likely much of the history of the firm will be lost. The Sheaffer nameplate is too valuable to let die, however, and I predict that if BIC does shut down the Fort Madison operation, they'll simply make Sheaffer pens elsewhere in the world. We can only hope that they continue to exemplify the good value and exemplary performance of the Sheaffers built for long just west of the Mississippi.



Seventy years of Big Sheaffers: Balance c1929 (top), PFM V c 1959 (middle), Intrigue Seal c 2001 (bottom)

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