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STORY OF THE PERKINS BRAILLER

Perkins Braille writers are used by thousands of people all over the world. When the Perkins Braille writers were first made in 1951, they were the best braillewriters ever invented. Howe Press, which is part of Perkins School for the Blind, has been making them ever since. They are easy to use, strong, and dependable. Many people believe they are still the best.

Braille was invented more than 170 years ago by a French teenager named Louis Braille. He understood the need for a system that blind people can use to read and write because he was blind himself. Braille is a system of raised dots that can be read very quickly with the fingers. In order to write braille by hand, a person uses a slate and stylus, just as Louis Braille did. The writer punches each of the dots in the braille letters one at a time. This can be rather slow.

The First Braille Writing Machines

About 150 years ago, inventors started making machines to speed up the writing process. Most of the machines weren't very sturdy, and some of them were very expensive. In 1892, Frank Hall invented a braillewriter that was different from the others. It was like a typewriter with six keys, one for each of the dots in a braille cell. This was a good design, and many other companies made braillewriters that worked the same way.

Between 1901 and 1931, Perkins School for the Blind also made braillewriters that were very much like Mr. Hall's. However, several things were wrong with them. They needed to be fixed very often, and their cast-iron frames broke easily when dropped. They were also noisy and expensive. Because they were made by hand, each one was slightly different from all the others. This meant that the parts from one braillewriter couldn't be used to fix another. Most of the braillewriters that were being made at this time had the same kinds of problems. The Perkins Braillewriters weren't really worse than the other brands, but they weren't any better, either.

Creating the Perkins Braille

In 1931, Perkins School for the Blind welcomed a new director, Dr. Gabriel Farrell. He wasn't proud of the quality of the Perkins Braillewriters, so he decided that Perkins should stop making them. But he hoped that Perkins could someday design and make braillewriters that were excellent. It would take someone who was very skillful to design a new machine that would be dependable and easy to use. Dr. Farrell knew he had to wait until he found just the right person to do it.

One day, some men were fixing the road that runs between the Charles River and the Perkins campus. One of the men, David Abraham, noticed the Perkins sign, and came in to see if the school had a teaching job for him. He was hired as a teacher of woodworking, because he knew a lot about carpentry and machines.

Mr. Abraham had grown up in Liverpool, England, where his family had a business that made railings for stairways. He had invented machines to do the work quickly. After Mr. Abraham started working at Perkins School for the Blind, his boss noticed how skillful and inventive he was. Dr. Farrell heard about Mr. Abraham, and asked him to design a new braille that would not have any of the problems that the old model had. This was a very big job, but Mr. Abraham agreed to do it.

Mr. Abraham talked to people so he would understand what the new braille needed to be like. He had a workshop in his basement at home, and he spent many hours of his free time working on this invention. He worked on it for years all by himself, testing model after model. Finally, he was satisfied with the design he invented, and he showed it to other people at Perkins School.

Everyone who saw the new design thought it was wonderful. The braille's six keys were easy to press, so that very young people and people who don't have strong hands could use it. The machine was tough and hard to break, and it was much quieter than other brailles available at the time. Putting in the paper and working the levers and controls were simple and fast, and the paper didn't fall out at the bottom of the page. It was very sturdy because the part of the braille that punches the paper was inside the machine. This means there was no paper roller or other breakable parts sticking out at the side of the machine. Best of all, it was easy to use. Mr. Abraham's new design for the Perkins Braille made it better than any other braillewriter than had ever been invented.

Mr. Abraham finished his design in 1941, just as World War II was starting. Dr. Farrell and Perkins School wanted to start manufacturing the new braille. But all of the factory materials in the country were devoted to the defense effort, so they had to wait. In 1946, after World War II had ended, the leaders of Howe Press and Perkins School voted to start producing the new brailles.

Manufacturing the Perkins Braille

It took five years to start making the new brailles. First, Howe Press had to move their factory from South Boston to Watertown, so that all the workers and tools would be in one place with plenty of room. Materials were hard to get after the war, and that slowed things down some more. The braille has many tiny parts that have to be assembled just right, and that takes time.

However, it was Mr. Abraham who delayed things most of all. He wanted the new Perkins Braille to be as perfect as it could possibly be. He tried different materials and different ways of making it, and he wouldn't give up until he knew he had found the best. Although it took a long time to get ready, the Perkins Braille is strong and reliable because of Mr. Abraham's care and attention to detail.

During the years of getting ready, the leaders of Howe Press and Perkins School were a little worried. It took a lot of money to set up the factory, and they didn't know if anyone would buy the new brailles. If nobody bought them, all the money the school spent on making them would be lost. Fortunately, when the Perkins Braille was finally ready in 1951, they were an instant success. They couldn't make them fast enough to keep up with the orders.

The Perkins Next Generation Braille

People have been using the Perkins Braille in over 170 countries for almost 60 years. Perkins School for the Blind and the American Printing House for the Blind decided to make it even better. We talked to people of all ages who use the Braille all over the world. Engineers helped us create a new Next Generation™ Braille that has all the things they asked for:



- It's lighter and easier to carry.
- It has keys that are even easier to press.
- It's quieter.
- Mistakes are easy to fix.
- It's easier to change the margins.

We are very proud, because the Next Generation Perkins Braille grants all of these wishes and more.

The Perkins Braille in the 21st Century

Nowadays, computers and special software make it very fast and easy to print braille. Why do so many people still want the old-fashioned mechanical Perkins Braille? The answer is because they are so simple and tough. Most people who are blind in the United States have a Perkins Braille in their homes for writing notes and messages. Few of these people would ever give up their brailers, even though they also use more modern computer technology.

Perkins Brailers are very reliable in classrooms all over the world, especially in places where there is no electricity or no computers. In many poorer places in the world, families have to struggle to give their children an education, and it's even harder for children who are blind.

Knowing how to read and write braille allows these children to find dignity and independence. Being able to use a braille is a very important part of their education. They can grow up to support themselves and their families and participate fully in their society. Because this is so important, Perkins

School and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation are partners in donating braille to schools that don't have much money in countries all over the world.

The Perkins Braille had very humble beginnings in Mr. Abraham's basement workshop in Watertown, Massachusetts, but it has become respected all over the world for its excellent quality. More than 50 years after the machine was first produced, the Perkins Braille still helps to bring education and independence to people everywhere.

Jan Seymour-Ford / April 2002 / Updated November 2009

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