It was a warm early fall day in 1945 in Columbus, Ohio, and this young woman carried her Royal Mercury portable typewriter1 to a backyard to write while she sunned herself on a blanket on the grass. This photograph resonates with us today as we take our laptops and other electronic communication technologies outside to outdoor cafes and parks.

But, while that resonance helps us identify with her intentions, it also hints at the roots of the activity shown in this and other images to follow. The photograph represents just one aspect of the important role the portable typewriter played in the transformation of communication behavior in America and Europe.2 Of specific interest here is the use of portable typewriters outside the enclosed spaces of buildings and vehicles, allowing individuals to write in more natural, open spaces. Ephemera, including photographs, trade catalogs, advertisements, posters and advertising postcards, illustrate this phenomenon and challenge us to explain the extent to which advertising and other factors contributed to the changes. While there has been a long-term debate about what constitutes a “portable” typewriter and when it first appeared, for purposes of this discussion portables are the smaller, lighter keyboard machine designs that include a carrying case. This was the predominant form of portable typewriters from the 1890s through the 1970s, and most would agree that the first regularly manufactured and sold example was the Blickensderfer #5, introduced widely in 1894-95. The earliest identified trade catalog for the model,3 from December 1895, emphasizes its portability. By 1897, it was still alone in the truly portable field; the original British distributor claimed, “The portable Typewriter, par excellence, is the ‘Blick,’ a full keyboard machine that... does not require a porter and barrow to transfer it from place to place.”

The introduction of portable typewriters took place in a larger context which included several, often interacting factors influencing the use of the machines in outdoor settings. One of these was the lap desk or writing box and its military and civilian uses. The lap desk has early roots in Europe and became a common possession of the upper classes, especially in England and to only a somewhat lesser extent in America by the end of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th century. Its use by military officers in the field and by wealthy civilians in travel are especially noteworthy.

Civilians took their boxes while on tour and to visit the estates of friends and relatives. Because of the limited interior lighting, it is likely that the lap desks were often used by travelers outdoors. The rest of the 19th century saw the dramatic expansion of manufacturing and business in Europe and America—in part through the large-scale introduction of railroad systems—and the use of lap desks for writing letters and record-keeping extended to the related rising middle-class members of societies in both areas.4 Ironically, the very explosion of industrial and transportation networks also brought the rapid growth of cities and industrial towns, and, with it, an increasing romantic nostalgia for the rural, bucolic world that many saw as disappearing. These attitudes were often matched by complex public and private debates about the asserted losses of social and emotional benefits thought to be part of natural settings. In addition, the expansion of reading about natural history in the wake of Darwin’s 1859 book on evolution led to the observation of wild settings, often through collecting wild leaves and flowers for pressing—activities newly legitimized by cultural ideas about the importance of science and its tie to “progress.” Small and large social movements encouraged people, for their health and their happiness, to go into nature.

1. Identification of model based on the trade catalog, New Royal Portable Typewriters, 1940.
2. Assistance was provided by Bob Aubert, Bert Kerschbaumer, Jos Legrand, Ed Neuert, and Cornelia Weil. Their contributions are greatly appreciated.
After Blickensderfer successfully introduced the #5, the company, like most manufacturers of portables, tended to use advertising to focus on practical uses of portables, partly in order to justify the large investment required to purchase a machine. For example, a $35 Blickensderfer in 1900 would cost about $700 in today’s dollars. We know that advertising often encouraged the conception of the portable as a practical tool, and photographs and testimonials indicate that the use of portables in outside settings in the 20th century frequently was for such practical purposes—the portable typewriter displaced the writing desk for business travelers and for other occupational purposes that took users outside. By 1914, Blickensderfer is asserting in a trade catalog that the aluminum version of their machine “Can be Used in the Open” and is “A Constant Friend Always on the Job.”

The theme is supported by this image of a land surveyor using the typewriter (p. 10). Another illustration of practical business as a theme in the use of portables can be seen in this 1920 advertisement for the Corona #3 (p. 10). The machine is featured as an essential part of a state-wide 1917 survey along the highways of Oregon by employees of the Washington-Oregon Telephone Co. This kind of practical, business-related outdoor “Coronatyping” is seen in actual activity in these two photographs (above). In the first one, from about 1920, a traveler is seen typing up some kind of information related to a road trip while sitting on the front bumper of his 1919 Apperson 6 Tourer beside a road in upstate New York near Syracuse. In the second, a likely reporter for the San Francisco Daily News is sitting on the fender of his Ford Model T truck in 1923 while typing on his Corona #3 on the hood.

However, after the early introduction of portables, we find both advertising and photographs of the machines in use tending to embody their communication role in much more relaxed and natural settings. The images’ contents also imply a more personal, private use of the machines for correspondence and even creative writing. One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in this stunning 1911 advertising postcard for the Erika portable (p. 10). A well-dressed, prosperous woman is situated in a lacustrine setting at an open-air restaurant. The assumption was that such a person was using the machine for some kind of personal communication and was benefitting in some way from this beautiful setting as she wrote. Another similar-themed advertising postcard from 1930 shows a wealthy man on an open sunny boat deck typing correspondence with his Urania-Piccola portable. Blickensderfer later elaborated on similar themes in a 1913 self-promoting article, a puff piece, asserting that the use of Blickensderfer portables in park-like natural settings could encourage the enjoyment of correspondence.

11. “Rana Gerump Says: Typewriter for Out of Doors as Well as for Office,” The Guide to Nature, v. 6, no. 4, August 1913, pp. ii-xii; Stamford Historical Association Archives, Stamford, Connecticut and the Bob Aubert collection. The photograph presented here is on p. iii and is from the Ed Neupert collection of high grade scans from the magazine.

10. Shipboard use on deck was a common theme in advertising for most manual portable brands throughout the first half of the 20th century. This stemmed from both the presumed wealth of the target market of ocean travelers and from the desire to identify their products with economic success.
pose of both manufacturers was to link their products to the healthy development of children inculcated in a rural setting, while also preparing them for the use of their products in the business world.

Non-advertising evidence showing the use of portable typewriters in more open, outdoor natural settings begins early in the century. The earliest found by the author is this 1910 to 1912 photograph showing a man in a wicker rocking chair located beside a corn field using a Standard Folding #2 portable. In this and other privately taken snapshots, we, the audience, are not usually told to what purpose the subject is using the machine. It could have been for personal or business reasons, but the subjects in these images all share a personal choice of the outside, often rural location of their activity, and this activity was aided by the portability of the subjects’ machines.12

An important part of the context of the outside typing with portables was the development of a youth culture and its greater control over consumption and lifestyle in North America and Europe. In the United States, according to many historians, the phenomenon grew out of the large-scale expansion of mass high school education after WWI. The boom of the 1920s combined with this change to increase the building of the identity of adolescents through displayed consumption, especially including clothing and music on phonograph records. Makers of portables began marketing their machines as an essential part of the education of members of the group. For example, see this cover from a 1922 trade catalog for the Remington #1 portable.13 The most distinctive and visible items of clothing at the base of the construction of the new social group, especially the identity of the women in it, were saddle oxford shoes, originally marketed in 1906 as sports footwear for the wealthy, and white cotton bobby socks.14

Many of the surviving snapshots of women using portable machines outdoors include the de rigueur saddle oxfords and bobby sox with their typewriters and other youth-related consumer goods. For example, shown here is a snap of a young woman lying on a blanket in a backyard between 1935 and 1940 with her shoes and sox beside her Remington #5 Portable and her Zenith or Admiral “tweed suitcase picnic” battery-powered portable radio. Similarly, we find another young woman, with the “required” shoes and sox (but with the skirt and blouse updated to the late 1940s fashion standard), sitting at a folding “card table” using her Corona #3 near a young man working with his Royal Deluxe. In another ca. 1940 example, a Royal Speed King1 is placed on one of these portable tables so well matched to outdoor typing. But picnic tables in regional parks also are frequently shown serving this purpose, as in this ca. 1950 image of a clearly hard-working typist in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, with his Underwood Champion portable and

12. However, it should be noted that there are some earlier images of the outside use of office typewriters by civilians and the use of many of them by soldiers in rugged field settings from as early as the late 1890s and throughout both world wars. The latter military use of typewriters was a factor in stimulating portable use outdoors after both wars. The military use of typewriters is a complex subject itself and will be addressed in a future “Ephemera” column.
14. See Kelly Schrum, Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945 (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004). Broadly, the author notes, “From fashion and beauty to music and movies, high school girls both consumed and influenced what manufacturers, marketers, and retailers offered to them.” This included the shoes and sox. By June, 1937, the identity of the women of this youth group was so bound up in the shoes and sox that Life magazine, then a major arbiter of trends in American culture, put an image of a teenage woman on its cover wearing them.
15. Identified using a trade catalog for the Monarch Radio Shop, 1938. Catalog in the Bob Aubert collection. The snapshot was probably taken in California.
his by-then empty bottles of soda pop.

Typewriter companies continued to target the youth culture segment that burgeoned even more after World War II, often emphasizing the use of portables as part of the freedom and self-driven choice so strongly identified with that age group. No single advertising effort more fully epitomizes this marketing effort than this ca. 1970 advertisement for the Olivetti Valentine. The decade that ended with that year had seen the power of the age group transformed from primarily an economic one to one with real political impact on the societies of America and Europe. Olivetti’s poster/ad, influenced by the style of Peter Max, symbolically presents the freedom and political importance of youth with their red machine in use in the unconfined space of the grass of a park. This was the zenith of manual portable machines and their use outside in the life of industrial societies. All of us, whether young chronologically or young at heart, continue the traditions of nearly a century of using portables al fresco when we turn on our laptops and smart phones Outside Over There.

16. Adrianus van der Elst was the artist. From collection of Bert Kerschbaumer. A song about the Valentine, commissioned by Olivetti, can be heard at 18rodas.blogspot.com/2010/01/cheats-valentine-fondo-musical-hispano.html.