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Ballpoint Pens

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BALLPOINT PENS The commonplace ballpoint pen was a post–World War II commercial phenomenon introduced in the United States by entrepreneur Milton Reynolds. During a business trip to Buenos Aires, Reynolds discovered the Birome ball bearing pen. While not a great success in Argentina, the Birome was popular among American flyers who encountered it during the war. The pen supposedly did not leak or smear at high altitude, nor require the frequent refilling of ink needed by fountain pens. Attempting to corner the market, Eberhard Faber Co. bought the rights to manufacture the Birome in the United States. Working with an engineer and a lawyer, Reynolds was determined to produce a ballpoint pen different enough from the Birome to be awarded an American patent. (The ballpoint pen had been invented in 1888, but inventor John Loud never manufactured the pen and the patent lapsed.) When the Reynolds International Pen Co. succeeded in manufacturing its ballpoint pen, it beat other competitors to the market. On October 29, 1945,

Gimbels department store offered the ballpoint pen for \$12.50 each and the product was an instant sensation. Within a week, Gimbels sold an astonishing 30,000 pens. Eventually, Sears Roebuck, W.T. Grant, Walgreen's, Allied Stores, and the Thrifty drug chain sold the Reynolds ballpoint pen as well. Reynolds went to great lengths to secure his product market. He sued Eberhard Faber and Eversharp Inc., citing antitrust infringements and unfair business practices in preventing the mass distribution of his company's pens. Counterclaims were made, but Reynolds spared no expense in national newspaper advertising. He gave cash prizes to druggists who had the best window displays of his product, and he even hired famed swimmer Esther Williams to prove that his ballpoint pen could write underwater. Reynolds's most dramatic ploy, however, was outfitting a light attack bomber dubbed the Reynolds Bombshell for an around-the-world flight that he and veteran flier William P. Odom completed in fewer than seventy-nine hours. Handing out 1,000 pens along the way, the Reynolds-Odom team broke Howard

Hughes's standing record between April 12 and April 16, 1948. President Harry S. Truman congratulated them at the White House. Other pen companies cashed in on the ballpoint pen bonanza. Ballpoint pen sales peaked in 1946 but then plunged due to market saturation. Inferior products, with ink that smeared and faded in sunlight, caused some schoolteachers to ban ballpoint use, and many banks refused to cash ballpoint-penned checks. In 1949, Paper Mate came on the market with a superior ink formula. Soon it was advertised with the catch phrase "bankers approve."

Further Reading: "Furor Over Pens," *Business Week*, March 2, 1946; Don Wharton, "Mighty Battle of the Pens," *Nation's Business*, November 1946; Steven Caney's *Invention Book*, 1985.

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