

Ottmar Mergenthaler, was born May 11, 1854, in the small village of Hachtel, in Baden-Wuerttemberg's Tauber valley. Hachtel is located 57km southwest of Würzburg. Mergenthaler was the son of a poor village school teacher who moved soon after Ottmar's birth to Ensingen, on the Enz river.

As a young boy Ottmar Mergenthaler took interest in clocks and becoming a watchsmith. Although his father was initially opposed to the idea, after some hesitation young Ottmar became apprenticed in Bietigheim, where he soon earned a journeyman's wage.

At Ensingen the clock in the church's bell tower had stood still for years, and no clockmaker had been able to repair it. One evening, however, the bells suddenly rang at evensong. "The schoolmaster's boy has done it!" was the surprised reaction. .

On October 26, 1872, the ship "Berlin" docked in Baltimore, Maryland, bringing 500 passengers in steerage. Among them was a slender, handsome young 18 year old man of medium height with blue eyes and red-blond hair, carrying only a wooden suitcase carved by peasants from his neighborhood. His name was Ottmar Mergenthaler.

At first, Mergenthaler worked on knives and tools in a shop, just outside of Baltimore, owned by August Hahl, a relative of Mergenthaler's. Because business was rather poor. Hahl moved to Baltimore proper where Mergenthaler became a member of the Liederkrantz Society and of the German Turnverein. He always had more ideas than time to execute them. Word of his talents soon spread.

On August 17, 1876, a stranger, Charles Moore, entered the shop, of which Mergenthaler had become co-owner. Moore told him he held a patent on a typewriter for newspapers which was designed to eliminate type-setting by hand, but that it just did not work. He asked Mergenthaler whether he could construct a better model.

Mergenthaler promptly recognized that Moore's design was faulty, but set about improving it. Two years later, he had assembled a machine that stamped letters and words on cardboard. But that was not what he had envisioned.

He then worked like a man possessed to construct what was to capture the attention of the world under the name of "Linotype" In doing so, he had to overcome many difficulties. One night, fire destroyed the shop, including all his designs and models. He knew, however, that if he succeeded, his invention would mean "more books ---more education for all.

He found a supporter in Whitelaw Reid of the New York Tribune. Finally, while riding on a train, the idea came to him: why a separate machine for casting and another for stamping? Why not stamp the letters and immediately cast them in metal in the same machine?

Much effort and another fifty patents were required before he could show a more or less usable model to the New York Tribune on July 3, 1886.

In 1888, Ottmar Mergenthaler contracted tuberculosis. He nonetheless continued to work unceasingly until his death at the early age of 44 in Baltimore on October 28, 1899.

Ottmar Mergenthaler has been called a second Gutenberg. Like Gutenberg, Mergenthaler revolutionized the art of printing. Prior to Mergenthaler's invention of the linotype, no newspaper in the world had more than eight pages.

So today we remember the precious contributions that this great German-American to the United States and the entire world. Ottmar Mergenthaler, born 11 May, 1854.

Works Cited

Center, German Information. Cazoo.org. 1976.
<<http://cazoo.org/Germans/OttmarMergenthaler.html>>.