

Slide Rules Tap Into Nostalgia Of the Pocket Protector Crowd

By Ian Austen

June 17, 1999

See the article in its original context from June 17, 1999, Section G, Page 4 [Buy Reprints](#)

[VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

WALTER SHAWLEE admits that in the 1960's, he frequently paraded around his Los Angeles high school with a slide rule -- "the techno-guys' version of a broadsword" -- protruding from his shirt pocket.

The introduction of the electronic calculator in the 1970's sent slide rules tumbling from the must-have category of geek chic. Even Mr. Shawlee reluctantly abandoned the slide rule -- including his first one, which took six months of saving to purchase -- when he headed to college to study computer science.

Now 49 years old and head of a successful firm in Kelowna, British Columbia, that specializes in designing electronics systems for aircraft, Mr. Shawlee is using the latest technology to keep slide rules on life support. Through his Web site, the Slide Rule Universe ([www.sphere .bc.ca/test/sruniverse.html](http://www.sphere.bc.ca/test/sruniverse.html)), Mr. Shawlee has become probably the world's largest retailer of unused, if rather old, slide rules. "There's yet to be a calculator made that's as easy to use as a slide rule," he said.

The site, which features thousands of slide rules for sale, is no Amazon.com. Still, for the last 18 months it has generated \$3,000 to \$6,000 a month selling slide rules. Along with pitches, there is a vast range of slide rule information.

"Walter has done the best job in the world of putting all this together," said Al Kalian, a slide rule collector in San Francisco who has purchased about 25 of them from Mr. Shawlee.

Mr. Shawlee's interest in the gadgets was revived two years ago when he found the two rules he had used in high school while cleaning out a desk. He was struck at how simple and elegant they were to use compared with high-end electronic calculators. The Web site followed, initially as an information service after he became frustrated by the scarcity of information about slide rules.

By reading E-mail to his site, Mr. Shawlee quickly discovered that there was an unsated demand for slide rules. But since production of general-purpose slide rules ended worldwide about 1972, as far as he can tell, used rules seemed to be the only option for the unsatisfied.

Then Mr. Shawlee heard from Foo Cheow Ming, a government worker in Singapore, about a year and a half ago. Mr. Foo had discovered at least five wholesalers and retailers (including a street vendor) in Singapore who were stuck with piles of never-used slide rules. In the end, Mr. Shawlee imported 3,000 from Singapore and rounded up a similar number of orphaned slide rules in North America and Europe, often from school boards, to start his retail business. Its offerings include a modest pocket-size rule selling for \$16 and a \$295 slide rule made in Japan and designed to solve chemical engineering problems.

Mr. Shawlee's largest group of customers is made up of people searching for slide rules like the ones they used at school. Slide rules are also sought by parents who want to improve their children's math skills. "People who grow up with calculators have no number sense," Mr. Shawlee said. He also sells slide rules to a weather station in Antarctica, where many electronic gadgets can't take the cold.

If Mr. Shawlee is any example, however, the chances of a slide rule resurrection are slim. While he uses them for some tasks, like currency conversions, he still relies on a battery-powered calculator for his electronics design work.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section G, Page 4 of the National edition with the headline: Slide Rules Tap Into Nostalgia Of the Pocket Protector Crowd