

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ORNAMENTAL PENMANSHIP

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In the years following the death of Platt Rogers Spencer, a number of his former students continued their mentor's efforts in promoting the Spencerian System of Writing. Post-Civil War America was experiencing an unprecedented growth in commerce and industry. Thousands of veterans returning from the battlefields sought employment, and new job opportunities suddenly appeared in the fields of business, manufacturing and education. It was an active period of economic growth, and skilled penmen were in great demand to record all transactions of what became known as "mercantile pursuits"

Several of the penmen soon established handwriting schools of their own. In addition, a few published handwriting manuals and copy books. Among Spencer's most successful students were Horace Shaylor, H. G. Eastman, Arthur Hinman and George Gaskell. Shaylor published his own lessons in the form of copybooks; Eastman and Hinman each founded a business college where the primary emphasis was on penmanship. George Gaskell similarly founded a school of penmanship studies, and then published a comprehensive book entitled Gaskell's Compendium of Penmanship. Through their efforts, these first generation students of Platt Rogers Spencer not only perpetuated his legacy, but further developed the forms of Spencerian Script.

As ornamental penmanship grew in popularity, an increasing number of penmen took delight in creating highly embellished capital letters, flourishes and bird designs. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century great interest was shown in artistic writing, and through the inspirational teaching of such instructors as those just mentioned, the most highly skilled individuals of the era surfaced from the ranks of emerging penmen. Men whose names today are legends as the great masters of Ornamental Penmanship began displaying their proficiency with a zeal unmatched by their predecessors. Henry Flickinger, William E. Dennis, Charles Paxton Zaner, Elmer Ward Bloser, A. D. Taylor, C. C. Canan, Edward Mills, Lloyd Kelchner, Francis B. Courtney, A. N. Palmer, Louis Madarasz, Fielding Schofield, Willis Baird, Charlton V Howe, Clinton H. Clark, Frederick Tamblin, John Williams, Silas Packard, H. R. Behrensmeyer and Harry Blanchard, among many others, taught scores of lessons and endlessly displayed their writing skills in the penmanship magazines of the day. By so doing, they influenced countless thousands of aspiring penmen, and set the standards for the very best that writing and the penmen's art could be.

THE BUSINESS OF PENMANSHIP

With the increased use of ornamental penmanship in business, a natural market was created for a source of the supplies necessary to the penman. Several magazines devoted to the penmanship profession were published. Chief among these were the Penman's Gazette, published by G. A. Gaskell; the Penman's Art Journal, founded by Daniel T Ames and later managed by Horace Healey; the Chirographer of E. K. Isaacs; the Chirographic Quarterly published by H. W. Kibbe; the Western Penman (which later became the American Penman), founded by A. N. Palmer, and the Business Educator, published by the Zaner-Bloser Company. Besides their standard fare of articles concerning the field of Penmanship, each issue contained numerous advertisements for a variety of tools, equipment, penmanship instruction and related products. Many different styles of pen points were promoted under such names as Spencerian, Esterbrook, Gillott, Zanerian, Hunt and Spratt. There was an assortment of "penmanship aides" as well, including the Myograph, the Royal Sleeve Protector, The Penman's Ring, the Triumph Penholder and the Auto Writing Ring.

Penholders were also prominently advertised by many penmen, but none were more prized than those made by Oscar Magnusson. Entirely crafted by hand, his holders featured exotic woods inlaid with ivory, and were perfectly balanced. Today, Magnusson penholders are true collector's items.

Regarding the subject of ink, the favorite writing fluids of the day were Korean Ink, (the choice of master penman Louis Madarasz) Arnold's Japan Ink, and Higgins Eternal Ink. This last variety, originated by Charles Higgins, is still available today and remains the preferred pre-bottled ink for ornamental writing. Unfortunately, the manufacture of Arnold's Ink and Madarasz's Korean ink were discontinued many years ago. Besides penpoints and ink, a large inventory of supplemental writing supplies was offered through the Auto Pen & Ink Manufacturing Company, Chicago, Illinois, and the Spencerian Pen Company, New York, New York. As noted earlier, many books and pamphlets were also printed that boasted the "finest examples of penmanship" The New Spencerian Compendium of Penmanship (1879), authored by the five sons of Platt Rogers Spencer; Gems of Penmanship (1866) by Silas Packard and John Williams; and Gaskell's Compendium of Penmanship (1883) were some of the most significant publications. One particular book became more famous for its title page than its contents. The Real Penwork Self Instructor In Penmanship (1882) was the epitome of overinflated advertising. Far less comprehensive than the previous texts listed, this slender volume featured Spencerian script from

the New Spencerian Compendium of Penmanship and off-hand flourishing from Gems of Penmanship as exemplars, and advocated a trace-and-copy method of practice.

Although these books were very popular, the copybook had become the mainstay of penmanship instruction. Used throughout our country's school systems for over 60 years, these small booklets were consumable by design. As such, they were published and sold by the millions. In using these books, students would attempt to copy, as accurately as possible, a line of idealized penmanship printed at the top of each page. Thus, once completed by the student, further practice necessitated that the pupil begin anew, using another copy book. Most of the copybooks, although authored by numerous penmen, primarily featured Spencerian letterforms. The Palmer copy books promoted "Palmer Penmanship," which was very similar to the style mentioned in Chapter 2 called Business Writing. Although there were many people claiming to have "the best means of instruction for an elegant hand," it was only natural that some of the most skilled devotees earned a respected reputation in the field of Penmanship. As the fame of these men and women spread, their influence in the art of writing similarly widened in scope. A select group of such artisans became known as "master penmen." Although never established as an "official" title, the master penmen were widely recognized and acknowledged for their talents. Those who achieved this status distinguished themselves in a variety of professional endeavors. Many of the more entrepreneurial individuals contributed frequently to the penmanship magazines mentioned earlier. In fact, for well over half a century, the majority of the published handwriting lessons were written by several generations of these master penmen. To the young writing enthusiasts of the period-excited with the anticipation of practicing new lettering exercises once their magazines arrived in the mail-the names of such prominent penmen became household words.

There were other professions in which the penmen engaged themselves. Several earned credibility in detecting forgeries as Examiners of Questioned Documents. These penmen served in the role of expert witness when called upon to testify in court or aid in other legal matters where authenticity was the issue. Most notable among such penmen was Francis B. Courtney. Known throughout the realm of penmanship as the "Pen Wizard," Courtney was indeed more versatile and more novel in his writing skills than virtually any other penman. Certainly there were other penmen who specialized in particular styles, and in their own domain, even surpassed Mr. Courtney's abilities. Surely no penman ever excelled in Business Writing to a greater degree than E. C. Mills or J. J. Bailey; in Engrosser's Script than Charlton Howe or Willis Baird; in Ornamental Penmanship than Louis Madarasz, C. P. Zaner or E. W. Bloser; or in the precise accuracy of letterform than A. D. Taylor or C. C. Canan. In the field of Off-Hand Flourishing, for their original designs and remarkable skills, it was said that Fielding Schofield, John D. Williams, Clinton H. Clark, Harry Blanchard and Henry P. Behrensmeyer were without peer, although many of the penmen were highly rated as flourishers. While these five gentlemen produced very elaborate, complex images of birds, quills and scrolls, the works of Zaner, William E. Dennis, George Gaskell, John Williams, Lloyd Kelchner, L. Faretra and Francis Courtney were similarly legendary, although perhaps not as pretentious. However, with his dexterous penmanship and flamboyant manner, Courtney's work often seemed to defy the laws of possibility. Surely, he was one of the most prolific penmen, leaving behind a treasure of specimens for us to enjoy. As described in Chapter 2, he took delight in amazing other penmen with his own "Courtney's Script" (Figure 17) which could only be read when the surface of the paper is held at eye level, with the sight-of-vision looking directly in line with the letter angle of his writing. One's eyesight tends to foreshorten the lettering in this fashion, and in doing so (squinting sometimes helps the process), the writing becomes legible.

Courtney's other unique forms of penmanship Needle stitch Script and Figure Writing (Figures 16, 18) became challenges to the best penmen. In his personal correspondence, he had no equal. His fish and blue bird flourishes* were a delight to behold, and he frequently used a yellow pencil to shade the entire paper surface, except in the location of his signature. In his commercial endeavors, Courtney advertised his correspondence courses with the slogan "the course you hear so much about," and published his "Lessons In Dashy Writing"*. As a showman, he had no rivals. He took delight in demonstrating his prowess with a pen, and on numerous occasions, displayed this in an imposing manner with a piece of chalk on a blackboard. Examples of two such pieces of work are shown below. The size of each board measured 51/2 feet high and 23 feet long! This work is amazing in itself, and yet, on one of the blackboards, he even signed his name in perfect ornamental penmanship upside down! In truth, Francis B. Courtney was unique among penmen.