

CW Norder (1881-1979)

This article will recite the life story of a Zanerian graduate who became one of the very best Engraver's script penmen, ever. He came from McKees Port, PA and was born on January, 28, 1881. He attended the Zanerian College in the early 1900's. Norder graduated from the college with a Gold Seal certificate signed by CP Zaner. He wrote the certificate himself. The Zanerian required the student to write his/her own certificate as a final test of the student's ability. Mr. Norder graduated in 1902.

Norder's first job was in New York at the Kinsley Studio. New York had three other studios: Ames and Rollins, Haring and Geyer, and Peter Sharp who had worked for Daniel T. Ames. In nearby Brooklyn was the Dennis and Baird Studio.

Kinsley died unexpectedly in the first year of Norder's employment. Norder said, "I got a few dollars for a very few jobs." He saw an ad in a penmanship journal for an engrosser's position in CL Ricketts' 'Scriptorium' studio located in Chicago. Norder applied for the position in 1903 and got the job. While Ricketts himself was not an engrosser, he distributed the work to the several artists under his employ. Curiously, Norder said, "Ricketts would pay no more than just barely a living wage." Norder lettered, wrote and practiced all the time. As Norder continues, "but that alright as he had plenty of work to do and I needed plenty, plenty of experience." Ricketts even promised Norder to 'go into business with him when the time came'.

Norder took 'a dozen or so' lessons in engraving from a jeweler to learn how to do script on metal. Norder has obtained three certificates from the Zanerian College. One was for script and the other two were in broad pen lettering. Norder even spent one Christmas season working for Marshall Fields Engraving. They wanted him back but he said, "I have learned what I wanted."

Norder worked at Ricketts Scriptorium for seven years. He asked Ricketts if he could 'get into the business'. Ricketts said, "You can buy into the business." But Norder's savings account could not support this venture.

Norder became good friends with Maury Harris, a Postman and part time engrosser for Ricketts. They decided to leave Ricketts and go into a partnership. The studio was called 'Norder and Harris'. Surprisingly, Ricketts sent the new studio his overflow work.

(Note: Many of the Illuminated specimens owned by Ricketts can be viewed at the Newberry Library under the name Ricketts or Walter.)

Norder dissolved his partnership with Harris after 9 years and moved to Pittsburgh, PA in 1920. He sold everything except the family Persian cat, went to the train station at midnight with his wife. Who should show up, but Ricketts himself to offer Norder his old job. However, Norder's mind was decided and he went to Pittsburgh.

According to Norder, he 'fixed up a letterhead, some business cards and placed a small ad in the telephone directory'. Norder was soon busy and Ricketts and Harris sent some work his way. He was happy because he was now setting the price for his work. After two years, Norder's business was doing well and he did not need to solicit work. One of his early jobs was a large resolution for Queen Marie of Romania requested by the Mayor of Pittsburgh. This job brought Norder much publicity. In addition, Norder began a 22-year relationship with the University of Pittsburgh for diploma engrossing.

Norder said, "In a few years I had become happily successful beyond my wildest dreams. All of the work had come to me and I did not take it away from anybody that I knew." Ricketts offered him the old job back twice with the promise of 'satisfactory financial arrangements'. Norder had heard that before and the \$5,000 per year he was making was more than Ricketts could afford to pay.

The depression of 1929 gave Norder no hardship. He got nervous, rented a smaller shop, took on engraving on the side but he found that his business remained good. He was a loner in his engrossing business and did his work by himself with little outside help.

Norder's goal was 'to retire in 25 years or at age 65'. In 1945 he did so. Norder and his wife sold their property, put their things in the car and prepared to leave Pittsburgh. Unfortunately, his wife was not able to join him in retirement. Mrs. Norder took ill and died in the hospital the next morning, a Sunday. He moved to St. Petersburg, Florida. During the rest of his life of 34 years, he 'golfed and did very little writing'.

According to Del Tysdal, Norder's script was "the finest script I had ever seen. The uniformity was amazing, the lines so fair and distinct. It is priceless as it reflects Norder's disciplinary control over a flexible steel pen mixed with his desire for perfection of form and years of 'diploma filling'.

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Charles W. Norder Penman, Engrosser and Illuminator Chicago, Illinois and Pittsburgh, Pa. 1881-1979

Auto-biography dated May 28, 1972

In the early 1970's I met Charles W. Norder in St. Petersburg, Florida. He had been an engrosser and lettering artist in Chicago (1909-1922) and then to Pittsburgh, Pa (1922-1943). He did marvelous art work and wonderful script--as good as any copperplate engraver. He sent to me his auto-biography, all 17 one-half pages. It is wonderfully interesting as it tells of his start in pen-artistry, the days and years of 'practice' with Maury Harris in Chicago, and then his leaving Chicago in 1922 (with his cat) and going to Pittsburgh with no work on line. If you would like me to post this wonderful story, I will (in short segments of course). Please let me know. (If you have the Zanerian Manual of Alphabets look for the memorial resolution to Elmer Ward Bloser. Norder did the entire piece.)

A letter from C. W. Norder, 1972, to Del Tysdal

I (Del Tysdal) had written to Mr. Norder and asked five questions of him about script (now called copperplate). Here is the exact text of his letter to me dated May 28, 1972

"Friend Delbert,

I have your letter of the 20th in which you ask me five questions about Engrossing. To answer them all fully would take quite a letter, in fact it could take a little book, and I am hardly in shape to do either today, but I will answer you briefly and I hope that may help you some.

Your question #1 is :

What pen did I use for small script, what pen for medium size script, and what pen for large script?

From my early years I used nothing but Gillott Pens. For small script that was not for reproduction work, I used #291 or #170. For larger work to be used for photo-reproduction I used #303 or the Principality.

An answer to your third question will need a separate letter - which I will try to write later. (This is his auto-biography, 17 one-half pages long)

Your question #4 is: In Text lettering (broad pen calligraphy, today) should the distance between the lines be about the same as the height of the lower case letters or twice that much? Certainly not just the height of the small letters. That would not look so good and would make for difficult reading. Twice the height is better but could vary for several reasons.

Answering you fifth question I would say yes, re-touch your script where necessary but be sure not to overdo on it. Retouch so carefully that your work will not show that it has been retouched.

Enough for now, I have not been any too well in the last couple of months but feel a little better today.

Best wishes to you. Sincerely, C. W. N. (Charles W. Norder)

Tysdal: It was a little surprise to me to learn through your friendly letters that someone could be interested in my life as an Engrosser and Illuminator since it is so long ago that I was in that work. (He retired in 1943 and this letter is dated 1972)

And you wanted a thumb-nail sketch of my life, and to tell what may have influenced me mostly to take up penwork as a life-time work.

I will try to comply with your request as far as I am able, and you may use any part of it or none of it as you like. I don't consider that my life has been very important to anybody, except to myself, of course.

Fact is, I drifted into pen work quite naturally, and was fortunately helped by two people who became my friends because of that work and who I will mention further on.

I was born January 28, 1881 (died May 26, 1979), next to the youngest in a family of five children. Father, with family, settled in Western Pennsylvania, in McKeesport, a steel town near Pittsburgh, because he was a steel worker, and hoped he would find that kind of work there.

But such work was not to be had and very little of any other kind. The country was going through a bad depression in the early 80's. So we, and many others, became well acquainted with poverty and misery. But with all, my brother, sisters and I, managed to get a fair school education.