

## AUSTIN NORMAN PALMER

TO be sure, there were many other penmen whose noteworthy careers and energetic personalities provide interesting fare to be retold and once again brought to light. Although an entire volume would be required to accommodate an all-inclusive list, there is a single penman whose contributions to the American system of writing were of such significance that he must be mentioned. His name was Austin Norman Palmer.

A. N. Palmer was born on a farm at Fort Jackson, St. Lawrence County, New York on December 22, 1860. His early youth was spent on the farm until the death of his father in 1873, when the family moved to Manchester, New Hampshire. In New England young Austin entered public school and received his only instruction in writing from the copybooks that were to be his most frequent object of attack in later years. After completing the public school course, his mother advised him to enter the business college of famed penman George Gaskell. It was here that the young student first became aware that writing skills could reach such a degree of perfection, for Gaskell's office walls were lined with all forms of ornamental specimens. As so many had done before him, A. N. Palmer fell under the spell of the bounding stags, graceful birds, and other involved flourishes that were the pride of the master penman.

At Gaskell's business college, Palmer became a friend of William E. Dennis, who was a fellow pupil. Young Dennis possessed a natural talent for ornamental penmanship, and although Palmer was aware that he might never reach Dennis' expertise as a penman, he did attain a proficiency in ornamental writing, and upon his graduation, was awarded a flourished letter of recommendation from Gaskell himself.

Palmer's formal education ended with a course at the Literary Institute in New Hampton, New Hampshire, after which he set out to organize classes in penmanship. He gradually worked his way west, teaching in Rockville, Indiana and St. Joseph, Missouri, where he taught in a business college.

Up to this time Palmer had not been forced to make any practical application of his handwriting skill. In 1880, he was offered a position in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with the Iowa Railroad Land Company. Since the first practical typewriter was not yet perfected, all business records were still kept by hand in the late 1800's. Clerks, bookkeepers, accountants, and other business-related professions had to do a vast amount of writing in the shortest period of time. There was no opportunity to demonstrate skill in flourished birds and shaded capitals. As Palmer analyzed this circumstance, he soon discovered that there was more to his situation than merely the fact that he had been trained to flourish his writing. He observed that the more important factor seemed to be that where it was customary for the ornamental penman to flourish all capitals with a free-arm swing, with the arm completely off the desk, and to draw the small letters carefully with finger and wrist motion, the clerks used, instead, an entirely different movement to write. The most swift and tireless penmen he observed appeared to keep the arm on the desk at all times and formed their letters with little or no motion of the fingers. After he adapted this movement for his own writing, Palmer soon acquired a free, tireless style of penmanship for himself.

The discovery of what he called "muscular movement" writing turned A. N. Palmer's thoughts back to teaching, for he soon resigned his position at a business office to work for the Cedar Rapids Business College at a lower salary. He began considering the educational possibilities of muscular movement writing, and decided that in order to promote the practical advantages of his style and at the same time offer instruction, he would need to advertise. This was more challenging than it appears, for all the penmanship magazines of the day focused on whole-arm movement writing; Palmer's system was much different. The result was that in April, 1884, at 24 years of age, A. N. Palmer developed and introduced a new publication into the field of penmanship. Named *The Western Penman* because he hoped that the magazine would attract an audience in the mid-western

states, this energetic owner/editor thus embarked upon a career that was destined to have the most far-reaching effects upon the teaching of penmanship in the United States since the days of Platt Rogers Spencer.

From the time of the establishment of *The Western Penman* until 1900, a period of 16 years, A. N. Palmer kept busy teaching in various cities in the middle west, but he never ceased publication of the magazine. In

1888, he published the first edition of Palmer's Guide to Muscular Movement Writing, in which we find the first definition of 'muscular movement' It is, as Mr. Palmer said in his introduction.

... the movement of the muscles of the arm from the shoulder to the wrist, while keeping the fleshy portion of the arm just forward of the elbow [held] stationary on the desk. This movement should be used in all capitals and in all small letters, except the extended stem and loop, where a slight extension and contraction of the fingers holding the pen is permissible."

This definition shows that as early as 1888 the teaching principles of the new method were pretty well formulated. The actual copies presented for practice, however, still showed the strong influence of the Spencerian forms. Letters are narrow, and loops are elongated, while moderate flourishes and slight shades characterize the capital forms. Quoting from Writing, Past and Present:

Mr. Palmer's success with large classes of students in business colleges had by this time convinced him of the fact that anyone could learn to write a free, tireless hand with his new method. In his desire to spread this knowledge and also to provide a self-teaching course he conceived the notion of preparing a course of lessons for publication in the Penman that would carry as instructions a stenographic report of his remarks before his class in the Cedar Rapids Business College The idea was carried out and over a period of six months he was given a daily transcribed report of every lesson. The course was published in the Penman beginning in the September, 1899 issue. "Not the least important thing the author has had in mind," said Mr. Palmer in his opening paragraph, "is that in hundreds of schools The Western Penman has been adopted as a textbook in writing, while in others it is used as an auxiliary, work being assigned for outside practice from its pages from time to time."

\*Writing Past and Present by Carroll Gard, 1937; A. N. Palmer Company New York.

This published course of lessons did a great deal to impress school people with the practical nature of the handwriting instruction Mr. Palmer was advocating, and it led directly to classes will again convene in the afternoon at one o'clock and will continue with the four divisions until five o'clock. Under this plan you will teach all the Sisters in divisions of fifty, two lessons a day, and they will spend all of their spare time between lessons practicing the drills you assign.

That program was carried out, and Mr. Palmer explains that he put every drop of his mental and physical vitality into the work, and the Sisters worked just as hard as he did.

At the close of Mr. Palmer's lessons, the Mother Superior asked for a conference and explained to him that while she could not adopt a monthly publication as a textbook in her schools, she would be glad to give an immediate order for enough copies of the lessons that had been printed in The Western Penman for all her schools, if such lessons were put into book form. Thus it happened that the first edition of the Palmer Method of Business Writing was printed for the Sisters of I.H.M., whose Mother House is at Monroe, Mich., and who conduct numerous schools in Detroit and other parts of Michigan, as well as in other States.

With such encouragement by the Sisters and with The Palmer Method of Business Writing now in the form of a textbook, the adoption of his instructions and advocated style grew at an astonishing rate beginning in 1900. In the course of a few weeks, 30,000 copies were printed and sold; in 1901, 90,000 copies; and in 1912, 1,000,000 copies were sold throughout the country.

In 1904 A. N. Palmer conducted a penmanship exhibit at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis. His exhibition generated nation-wide attention from school authorities everywhere. In an early issue of Palmer Penmanship Pointers, he described the events:

It was quite difficult to get a foot hold in the public schools. The big publishers seemed to control the situation and were selling copy-books everywhere. Results were not considered above preconceived notions and the influence of the agents of copy-book publishers was sufficient to keep me out of the public schools. I did, however, obtain adoptions in several small places and some good results followed, but there

was not the enthusiasm among public school teachers that I found among the Catholic teachers. Some public school teachers were not willing to study, practice and master the progressive steps in advance of teaching them to their pupils But the work continued to spread. During the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, in St. Louis, a very comprehensive exhibit of Palmer Method penmanship was made, nearly all of it being from Catholic schools.

An Associate Superintendent of the City of New York saw the exhibit. He left word with the clerk in charge that he would like to know more about the Palmer Method, and would like to see Mr. Palmer when he visited New York. This resulted in the listing of the Palmer Method for use in the public schools of New York City. At first principals showed considerable timidity in making introductions. The results obtained in several schools, however, were of such a character as to attract the attention of many progressive principals who believed that something should be done to improve the penmanship of our schools. Since all those connected with the Palmer Method had no personal acquaintance among the officials of the public schools of New York City, principals or teachers, the personal element had no direct or indirect bearing upon the introduction. It was merit alone that carried the Palmer Method in four years into schools representing probably more than half of the enrollment of the elementary schools in the city. The exact number of pupils supplied in those four years was 285,605. All this was accomplished in the face of the strongest opposition from the largest concerns publishing textbooks.

In the above quotation, Mr. Palmer refers to one principle that was responsible for a large part of the success of his plan for teaching handwriting. He absolutely refused to be responsible for the writing in any school unless the teachers were first qualified as experts in the style of writing they were required to teach. He frequently said: "Teachers cannot teach what they do not know," and this was the key to his whole philosophy of the teaching of handwriting. His own enthusiasm, which was so evident in his own writing and teaching, was an energetic characteristic he sought to develop in his students. He tried to contact educational institutions in every direction of America in his efforts to reach the greatest number of people. The extent of his correspondence was enormous, and after the establishment of the Palmer Method Summer Schools, he made a habit of visiting each school, as well as many other institutions where special handwriting courses were being given. The result was that literally thousands of teachers were filled with his own enthusiasm, and from the ranks of these came the handwriting supervisors and specialists who were destined to carry the new method into every community throughout the land. Truly, this was not a short-lived trend of writing. In 1915 Mr. Palmer's system received the Gold Medal at the Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, California, and in 1926, the Gold Medal at the Sesqui Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He maintained offices in New York; Chicago; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and in Portland, Maine.

From the time of the adoption of the Palmer Method in New York City in 1905, the old Copy Book System which advocated whole-arm movement was doomed. A permanent office of the A. N. Palmer Company was opened in New York City that same year, and under the laws of his company's home state, Iowa, Mr. Palmer's business was formed as a corporation on February 25, 1905.

With increasing business interests throughout the years, A. N. Palmer remained essentially a teacher, never losing his touch with the classroom. He was an educator and publisher of uncommon energy. On November 16, 1927, just one month prior to his 67th birthday, he died after a brief illness. At the time of his death, over 25 million Americans had learned writing from the Palmer Method of Penmanship.