

Penmanship Experts Compare Notes

In 1850, the Spencerian method of penmanship was developed in the United States and was taught in public school,, and colleges around the nation until the 1940s when it was dropped and replaced by more academic subjects.

As it was losing popularity in the United States in the 1930s and 40s, -the Japanese discovered it and developed it even further. Today, the Japanese continue to teach penmanship in public schools throughout the country.

Dakota Business College, Fargo, is the only school in the area and one of the few in the United States that still teaches penmanship. They have been teaching it since 1890 when the school was founded by the late F. Leland Watkins, and his son, F. Leland Watkins Jr., who learned the art from his father, has been teaching it since 1921. *D. Tysdal, a former vice president of the International Association of Master Penmen, attended Dakota Business College and has been teaching penmanship there for six years.

For 10 years the school has been corresponding with the vice president of the Japanese Federation of Penmanship, Kiku Yamaguchi, who visited Fargo this week on his way to the International Penmanship convention in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Yamaguchi learned penmanship through correspondence with an expert in Kansas City, Mo., in 1936. Since that time penmanship has become a required course in grade school in Japan, while at the same time, the requirement was being dropped throughout the United States.

As well as doing ornamental writing, the type seen on official documents and diplomas, Yamaguchi does what is called flourishing, an intricate form of drawing with pen and ink. Flourishing is also taught at Dakota Business College by Tysdal and Watkins, but, referring to a bird Yamaguchi drew, Watkins says, "I can draw a bird too, but you wouldn't mistake it for a bird, I mean you wouldn't have to put a cover over it to keep it from flying away."

Even though it seems that penmanship has been viewed as of little importance in the United States in recent years, according to Tysdal, thousands of people in this country are interested in penmanship either as a hobby or a business.

It's usually not a primary business but done on the side by those who enjoy and are proficient in ornamental writing. It is used on business documents, awards, certificates, and diplomas and those who do it professionally are apparently in great demand.

According to Tysdal, it takes about six weeks to two and a half months to learn ornamental writing but the more difficult flourishing takes years to perfect.

Tysdal and others like him interested in this type of art would like to see it grow in popularity in the United States again for as Tysdal says, "Penmanship, either as a profession or as a hobby is pleasant, relaxing, and rewarding"