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SIMPLIFIED PENMANSHIP

A paper read before the Western Penman's Association, held in Chicago, December, 1885, by C. P. Zaner.

The tendency of the times is toward the intensely practical on the one hand and toward the richly ornamental on the other. In the penmanship world it is the same. Either write rapidly and legibly or beautifully. Persons who can do either find their services in demand, and demand nearly always means money. But as the practical is the quality most universally required, I will confine my energies to that phase of the question.

The phenomenal growth of commerce and the rapidity by which trade is carried on require an expeditious method of recording such transactions. It has been but a few decades since the pen was the sole instrument used in such writing. But now the typewriter does much of that which had become too burdensome for the pen. Shorthand has done wonders in minimizing effort and increasing expression.

And I want to say right here that no one welcomes these modern devices and means of expression more heartily than I do. Let the typewriters multiply, and become so small that we can carry them in our pockets and so cheap that all can afford them. Yes, even so cheap and simple that the pupils of the schools from the kindergarten to the university can use them. (Emphasis added.) All this, and even more, I hope to live long enough to see.

But you may say "this presents a gloomy outlook for penmen." So it should for all who cannot adopt, adapt, and develop practices in accord with the age in which they live. All who cannot grow must be content to decay. If we cannot keep up with the procession we must be content to bring up the rear. Some one must be last, and it might as well be a fogie penman as a peevish philosopher.

In looking at the forms used in writing today we find them not very unlike the ones used a hundred years ago, either in appearances or execution. In fact, they are not radically different than some that were used two centuries ago. I am of the opinion that we have not changed and improved the implements of written thought nearly as much as we have the means of traveling, of sowing and reaping, of illuminating the night, of speaking long distances, and of doing nearly all things. We have improved our penmanship about as much as lexicographers have our orthography. You will no doubt agree with me that the possibilities for improvement in spelling are well nigh unlimited. Just what proportion of our poor spelling is due to poor teaching of spelling or due to poor method is a much debated question. Some say the method is all right but the teaching all wrong. Others declare the teaching all right but the method of spelling all wrong. But I am of the opinion that the majority believe that the chief evil lies in the method of spelling rather than in the teaching.

So it is in penmanship; the possibilities for improvement are almost limitless. What proportion of poor writing is due to poor penmanship or due to poor methods of execution is, the same as in spelling. Many declare the penmanship (style of letters) to be all right but the teaching and execution all wrong. Others affirm that the movement and method of teaching is all that could be desired but that the forms themselves are such as to retard great speed, ease of execution, or clearness in expression.

This is only the first part of part one of a two part article on Simplified Script and that if Simplified Script was adapted that it would speed up writing without diminishing legibility. I thought Zaner's remarks on the typewriter and its size were interesting. Rather than bemoaning the invention and complaining about its threat, he embraced it and recommended a simpler, speedier, and easier style of penmanship in order to keep up with the times.

Much of the argument on both sides is right because sometimes the movement and method of teaching are horribly poor. On the other hand, it is very likely that the complex forms given are due, in a great measure to this bad execution and poor teaching. (Emphasis added.) And it is our purpose now to examine into this matter of form and to find out, if possible, to what extent the forms generally used are responsible for the vast quantity of poor penmanship that we see in the world.

Upon examination of the forms most generally taught we find that they are made up of short turns and non-retraced angles, straight and slightly curved lines, ovals and loops. We find, also, that forms vary from one to five spaces in length. Authors and teachers have insisted that certain slants shall be adhered to and that forms should be one, one and one-fourth, two, two and one-half, three, three and one-half, and five spaces in length until we have a style of penmanship that is burdened with more rules and technicalities than one in a thousand ever learn or ever practice.

Symmetry of form, beauty of curve, harmony of stroke, delicacy of line have been considered and developed until our penmanship is about as characterless as a row of tenement houses. The editor of the "New York World" observes "symmetry in handwriting is as much a vice as a virtue. It robs the writing of character. It deprives written words of that physiognomy which facilitates rapid reading. Every person who has much manuscript reading to do knows that there is no greater weariness than the prolonged perusal of manuscript that resembles copper-plate" (meaning copy-book style).

The standard hand is very rarely written perfectly. It is an art so difficult that the schools fail in most cases to teach it to the children. They teach them instead to make a poor, characterless and often contemptible imitation of an unattainable model.

"The object in writing is to set down words quickly and easily in a form in which they can be read. Concern for anything other than ease and rapidity of writing and absolute legibility is simply irrational."

"Anybody who has the use of his eyes and his hands can learn to write legibly. It is therefore a distinct immorality to write illegibly. It subjects others to needless annoyance and loss of time, which in the case of printers, proofreaders, editors and the like means also a loss of earnings."

Where is the penman who could crowd so many cold facts (disagreeable though they be) in so few sentences? He, who did it, is a writer and not a mere penman. It is questionable if he could have written so much sense had he used our conventional style of penmanship. His thought would have been consumed in constructing beautiful curves, angles, turns and ovals. (Emphasis added.)

It is evident we have been catering to many things not essential to legibility and speed. We have aimed at impossibilities and have encouraged thereby illegibility. Having striven for beauty we have developed complexity. Having insisted on specified slants we have sinned against Nature. (To be concluded in May, June and July Number.)

Joe, what I think Zaner is saying is that not everyone has the talent or time to become a professional penman. So why teach the same difficult forms and complex to the person who is not going to become a professional, it will just result in illegibility. If you simplify the forms and make them easier to learn, you give the average student who has no desire to become a professional the ability to write legibly and rapid.

That is why I enjoy looking at some of the "non-professional" writing of some of the professional penmen. I enjoy looking at Spencer's writing on page 224 of Michael Sull's book and Madarasz's on page 341. The scan of the letter I sent the group entitled Letter Signed Spencer isn't perfect, but it is interesting to look at. I also like to look at George Washington's penmanship. Also in one of the scrapbooks Michael Sull had, there was some writing of A. D. Taylor that was very "non-professional." Perhaps you can persuade him to scan or photocopy it for the group to see.

Sincerely,

Michael Butorac