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Western's Heritage of Penmanship

Lynn E. Niedermeier

Western Kentucky University, lynn.niedermeier@wku.edu

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Through most of Western's history and that of its predecessors, the Southern Normal School and Bowling Green Business University, college men and women strove to master penmanship as intently as they do today's software programs.

More than just a means of communication, handwriting has always been a form of self-presentation. Colonial merchants ranked expert penmanship ahead of arithmetic and bookkeeping as crucial to business success. The Victorians associated good handwriting with self-assurance, trustworthiness and a capacity for hard work—in short, with the highly prized attribute of “character.” By the mid-nineteenth century, as a result, legions of penmanship instructors could be found in both common school classrooms and specialized commercial programs.

One such instructor was Henry Hardin Cherry, the owner of the Southern Normal School and Bowling Green Business University, and later Western's first president. Cherry was a disciple of Platt Rogers Spencer, whose method dominated handwriting education after the Civil War. With its meticulous use of pen and ink to create the hair-thin upward strokes and thick downward strokes of elegantly shaped letters, Spencerian writing was admired as the product of a trained hand and a disciplined mind. It also possessed an aesthetic quality that appealed to the Victorian yearning for moral elevation and refinement. Accomplished penmen like Henry Hardin Cherry advertised their skill not only with customary spirals and flourishes in their letters and signatures, but by executing ornate and graceful representations of birds, swans and other subjects of nature, all without a smudge or a spot.

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the Spencerian style was falling out of favor as too slow and fussy. One historian has even suggested that the rejection of its rather feminine appearance mirrored a general anxiety over increasing numbers of women entering the workplace. In any event, Austin Norman Palmer, a penmanship instructor in New England, introduced a simpler handwriting style that could be executed neatly but rapidly, almost robotically, in keeping with the pace of modern business. Endless drills in proper arm motion, known as “push-pulls” and “ovals,” formed the basis of his teaching technique.

Palmerian writing took hold at the Bowling Green Business University, whose new owners had purchased the school from Henry Hardin Cherry in 1906. Handwriting specimens in its promotional literature often took the form of copybook aphorisms that reinforced the traditional association of good penmanship with good character. Department head Warner C. Brownfield wrote that perfect script like his was “within the reach of all who have one good arm, one good eye, plus confidence, thrift, determination, [and] patience.” Another sample hinted that obedience and conformity, rather than spontaneity and initiative, brought security to young men and women in the workplace: “Plan your work ahead and stick to it—rain or shine,” it read. “Don't waste sympathy on yourself. If you are a gem, somebody will find you.” Still other specimens were of letters, invoices, receipts and ledger entries—offering, in retrospect, a clearer picture of the life awaiting a bookkeeper, clerk or telegraph operator in the bureaucratic world of modern business: in imitation of Palmer's drills, literally that of a “pen-pusher.”

The introduction of the typewriter highlighted this growing homogenization of the workplace and helped create a backlash against the notion of handwriting as a mere imitation of ideal forms. Graphologists and autograph collectors began to invade the field of penmanship,

celebrating peculiarities of script as evidence of a person's unique intelligence, personality and even health. The Bowling Green Business University, however, made only minor concessions to this trend. A course in "ornamental" writing allowed artistically inclined students to train as engrossers of diplomas, certificates, calling cards and legal documents, but such instruction still relied heavily upon the copying of model scripts. Another means of individual expression was legitimized in 1917 when the school awarded prizes for the "best" student signature, congratulating two young men who inscribed their names with "individuality, originality and 'dash.'"

The Bowling Green Business University continued to offer penmanship courses until it merged with Western in 1963. Western itself, chartered in 1906 as the successor to Henry Hardin Cherry's Southern Normal School, was no less an advocate of handwriting proficiency. Its penmanship department did not dissolve until 1965 after the retirement of Gavin G. Craig, a member of the faculty since 1922. The author of a master's thesis and several books on penmanship, Craig wrote a Palmerian script at the age of sixty-five that was as flawless as that written in his twenties. But even he was intrigued by the mysteries of graphology: in 1960 he delivered a lecture on the "detection of cancer by a person's handwriting."

Although technology has made much handwriting avoidable, it has not been rendered obsolete. On the contrary, handwriting has not only survived the electronic age but has influenced its development. Information technology at Western provides some examples. An e-mail "signature," that pithy saying or humorous quotation that sometimes follows the sender's typed name, is a kind of self-presentation that tries to replicate the "dash" of a penned signature. The smiling symbol :-)) and other emoticons or electronic "doodles" are similar attempts to assert the human face behind the typeface. The standard word processing program offers a generous selection of script-based fonts, even though most internet browsers do not automatically support them. The challenge for "palm" technology, found today in those pocket-sized digital calendars, is to read an owner's penmanship as he or she inputs information not with a keyboard but with an old-fashioned writing stylus. Paper and ink, too, will continue to serve the purposes that human nature will not reassign to cybertext. Most Western graduates, one suspects, would not choose an e-mailed "diploma" over a real document, on heavy bond paper, lettered and inscribed in the style of Henry Hardin Cherry.

Sources:

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