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## G. G. Craig, Western's Master Penman

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G. G. Craig, Western's Master Penman  
by Lynn Niedermeier

For decades prior to his death on November 18, 1976, G. G. Craig's mail, delivered to Beech Bend Road, Bowling Green, Kentucky, brought envelopes inscribed with the carefully practiced handwriting of both gradeschoolers and teachers. The sender might write Craig's name and address using one of several styles of penmanship—ornate Spencerian, staid Old English or clean, rounded Palmerian—but the brief form letter enclosed was always an “examination” intended to show proficiency in the correspondent's rendering of the National Standard Script Alphabet.

The recipient, Gavin Grundy Craig, was head of the penmanship department at the Western Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College (now Western Kentucky University) from 1922 to 1965. Born a “leap year baby” on February 29, 1896 in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, Craig received his Bachelor of Secretarial Science degree from the Bowling Green Business University in 1920. He pursued further expertise in his chosen field, earning a certificate from Ohio's Zanerian College of Penmanship in 1926 and studying at the Bowling Green Business University again from 1926 to 1929. During his long career at Western, he taught more than 22,000 students.

Craig was the author of several textbooks on penmanship, and in the 1950s served as president of the International Association of Master Penmen and Teachers of Handwriting. The creator of Craig's Advanced Handwriting Scale, he offered to evaluate any sample of penmanship using minute criteria such as “form, movement, neatness, alignment, slant, size, quality of line, arrangement, spacing, and relative height of parts and crossings of letters.” Correspondents who received a passing grade became eligible, upon payment of fifty cents, for a hand-colored, engrossed certificate appropriate to their level of expertise. To reach the summit of achievement—the Professional Penmanship Certificate—required no less than completion of all 135 lessons in Craig's own writing course manual.

Craig subscribed to the commonly held view that good handwriting reflected personal discipline and strength of character. Whether right or wrong, he insisted, “people are judged by their penmanship.” He departed, however, from the popular theory that children should learn how to print before being taught script. With proper instruction emphasizing rhythmic movement and arm motion, Craig believed, even first-graders could write in longhand. Craig himself was a study in the benefits of rigorous training and practice. Letters written when he was 29, then 65 years of age, were identical in their neat and legible script.

Such an apparently fastidious man did, however, have a whimsical side. Craig made his offer to award penmanship certificates in a little booklet called “Craig's Circus Alphabet,” published in 1932 and followed by a 1952 edition called “Owl-phabet's Circus.” The booklets featured each letter of the alphabet, embellished step-by-step until it resembled an animal; thus, a few flourishes of the pen turned an “a” into a squirrel, an “e” into an owl, a “j” into a pigeon and an “x” into a horse and rider. Perhaps mindful of the drearier aspects of handwriting instruction in schools (of which he advocated at least 30 minutes per day for grades 1 through 8), Craig promised teachers that his Circus Alphabet would motivate students to improve their

penmanship. To a man like Craig, for whom immaculate writing had become second nature, it was a small step to discern in the letters of the alphabet the curve of a bird's wing, the bend of a horse's neck, or the loop of a snake's coils. "The process is easy," he declared. "Simply make the letter and dress it up."

Sources:

University Archives Biography File, G. G. Craig  
University Archives Faculty Collection, G. G. Craig