

# THE HALCYON DAYS OF FINE PENMANSHIP



by  
*William Christopher Henning*

*I*n August 4, 1961, our family gathered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for the birthday of my father, William Christopher Henning. There were visitors, phone calls, a camera session. Fine though this was, the real blessing came to my father when he could escape to his room.

He sat down at his desk, a giant oak rolltop that he had had for 40 years. Here, with his paper and pens and ink, he was in his element. He uncorked his bottle of Higgins Eternal black ink, then dipped into it his Gillott Principality pen. On a corner of paper he tested the pen. A pin prick of ink first, then as he applied pressure the nibs sprang open and the mark became

wider and wider. Yes, the pen was functioning as it should. He wrote:

I am ninety years old today and can write some yet.

A certain ruefulness must have possessed my father as he contemplated what he had just written. The infirmities of age come and go, and on some days my father did much better than this. The style that he essayed on this particular day was ornamental shaded script. It requires rhythm and an exquisitely controlled pressure to produce just the right amount of shading. One might compare script writing to skating; both

skills are acquired only after considerable practice, and both demand a smooth-flowing speed to make the arcs, the loops. Yet at the age of 90 not many people skated so well, nor did they write so well, either.

My father's skill and pride in his penmanship were part of a vanishing tradition, and he was one of the last in a long line of penmen. Several, in fact, studied or taught in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and from that vantage point, he experienced the halcyon days of fine penmanship. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Good handwriting was prized in previous eras, and so were its practitioners. When early writing master Abiah Holbrook died, his funeral notice in 1769 declared him to be the "greatest master of the pen." (Among Holbrook's 220 pupils was one whose very name is synonymous with a well-written signature: John Hancock.) Thomas Jefferson handled the pen well, but for the final copy of the Declaration of Independence sought a better penman than himself, the Quaker Timothy Chalkley Matlack. Jacob Shallus penned the Constitution and was paid well for it.

In the 19th century as well, the attractions of writing a good hand were more appreciated than they are now. It would be decades before the typewriter would make inroads on longhand writing, and even then there was no argument that script writing was more personal and, if well done, more beautiful.

Penmanship was often taught by itinerant teachers and writing masters, who borrowed methods and styles from each other and developed their own virtuosity and loyal followers. Of 19th-century penmanship teachers, Platt Rogers Spencer was perhaps one of the more enterprising. By 1859 his system was published, and Spencerian copybooks became fixtures in schoolhouses, as students endeavored to mimic the flawless script at the top of each page.

Like Spencer, Austin N. Palmer had an ambition to be a fine penman. He studied at George

Gaskell's penmanship school in New Hampshire, where the walls were covered with the more decorative side of penmanship—"flourished" birds, snakes and bounding stags. "Nothing else in the world was quite so beautiful or important as ornate penmanship," Palmer remembered. He paid his tuition by sweeping floors, addressing newspaper wrappers, and making up packages for Gaskell's prosperous learn-to-write-by-mail business. Soon Palmer became an itinerant teacher himself, advertising and conducting his own classes. In 1879, when his mother moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where her daughter was living, 22-year-old Austin followed.

For two years Palmer worked in Cedar Rapids as a contract writer for a land company and as a policy writer for an insurance company, for in those days such documents were handwritten. This experience impressed on him the value of writing fast, tirelessly, and yet legibly. "I thought that I was an expert penman at the beginning of my office experience but I soon learned that I was not even a good business penman," Palmer recounted. In the following years, he would remedy that situation by developing the Palmer Method of handwriting and promoting it from Cedar Rapids.



Platt Rogers Spencer first published his Spencerian system of penmanship in copybook form in 1859.

About the time that A. N. Palmer was realizing his weaknesses as a business penman, my father, William C. Henning, was a boy in Michigan, practicing his own handwriting in the feeble light of a coal oil lamp on winter evenings. He later described how his father "would often write something in his best hand and challenge me to beat it," and how his mother "had several copy books that she had filled with practice during her late school days, and I would look them through and through with great admiration."

His greatest inspiration and instruction, however, was his older sister, Ida. "The neatness and uniformity of her handwriting were quite marvelous. During the fall and winter she traveled to Flint to attend a private normal school and here she received instructions in plain and ornate writing," he recalled. "She brought home an oblique penholder, the first I had seen. To me

it was a fascinating novelty and I was immediately ready to try my hand with it. I would watch her write with it, cutting smooth shaded strokes and delicate and graceful fine lines."

With practice, his own skills grew, and by age 16, in 1887, he was teaching his own evening penmanship classes in the neighborhood schoolhouse. Later, after studying at Oberlin Business College in Ohio, he sought personal training. When he heard that Louis Madarasz, whom some considered the world's finest penman, was teaching for one A. N. Palmer in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, my father wrote to inquire.

The replies received from Palmer's school were addressed in a flowing hand, the strokes exquisitely formed, the best writing my father had ever seen. In December 1892, he headed to Iowa to study under Louis Madarasz and A. N. Palmer.

**M**adarasz was known as an "offhand" writer, meaning he simply sat down at his desk and wrote — sans penciled guide lines, sans warm-up. He had first learned penmanship from a *Gaskell's Compendium* ordered through the mail, and as a teen, he earned money by setting up a table in a public place and writing calling cards.

Throng gathered around to watch him write their names in as many different ways as he had cards to fill, swiftly, easily, covering his table with the cards as he set them out to dry.

The rapidity with which Madarasz turned out fine work was in his favor. He could write a set of business capitals in 21 seconds. He could produce a large heading in a few minutes (a comparable job by an engrosser, outlining in pencil, filling in with pen and brush, would take many hours). And he created a sort of awe or mystique. "Just to watch him work," one pupil said, "was worth a trip across the continent." His swirling pen produced great capitals in an infinite number of ways, and if anyone has ever achieved perfection in the writing of small letters, it was Madarasz.

Eager to emulate Madarasz, my father practiced his drills. A solid page, the "O's" swinging large and shaded, the small letters marching with perfect regularity: Ohioans Ollivier Ollivette Ostrum. The showy capitals first catch the eye, but the connoisseur looks sharply at the small letters: em eminent engineers endeavoring eminent endings. The aim is perfect spacing, perfect shape, uniformity: can cannery caucus candies carrying coal.

**I**n April of 1893, my father met a student who would become a lifelong friend. Francis B. Courtney enrolled at Palmer's school in Cedar Rapids to study for one month under the great Madarasz. Courtney already wrote with such phenomenal skill that one

might ask what he was doing there, and was there anything left to teach him.

Much of Courtney's fame came from his ability to demonstrate his wonderful skill on a blackboard. While he talked to his audience, his hands were busy producing a labyrinth of graceful curves. He wrote with both hands in opposite directions. He duplicated anyone else's writing, wrote style after style, produced fine monograms on instant notice. And he saved until last a feat

that never failed to bring down the house: he wrote upside down and backwards—not material that he had practiced earlier but names called out from the audience and, as the *Milwaukee Journal* had it, "faster than the ordinary man could write them in the ordinary method—and about a hundred times better as well."

Once in a while Courtney's sheer virtuosity got the better of his good judgment; this is most often seen in his "flourishing." In flourishing a bird, for example, he might rain on the strokes until the bird existed in a veritable thicket. Perhaps he failed to see the cluttered mess he was creating because he was so pleased at the way his hand was behaving.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

**Francis Courtney excelled at ornamental penmanship and "flourished" birds like this one. (The capital letters beginning each section of this article are also by Courtney, from alphabets he developed.)**

A. N. Palmer knew that flourishes and ornamental styles had their place in penmanship instruction. He himself had often choked with emotion over a piece of exceptionally fine ornamental writing. But the practical aspects of penmanship were Palmer's forté, since he believed that everyone should be able to write with ease, speed, and legibility. And, as he also believed, the best way to learn this was through the Palmer Method. In developing his method, he later recalled, he had studied "the movement used by the best business writers," having "never found a really good business penman who wrote a style embodying legibility, rapidity, ease, and endurance who did not employ muscular movement."

Palmer made much of what he termed "muscular movement"—the term was not original with him, but he used it so much that it became his. The proper position was essential: the arm, with its rolling motion, was to be supported by the large muscle of the forearm. "Practice makes perfect," he was fond of saying, "but only practice of the right kind." Various drills developed control and established rhythm. Ovals and straight lines ("push-pulls") were practiced; then letters were interspersed between the ovals and push-pulls, and then words. One practiced until the next movement came naturally, and one movement flowed into another—as one dance step flows into the next.

The correct tools were also important for speed and evenness. Steel pens were always used, and Palmer instructed his pupils to dip deep and remove the pen slowly from the inkwell so it would hold maximum ink. With only one dip of ink, he assured his pupils, he could make 500 ovals—and probably 2,000 with the right pen, sufficient ink, and quality paper.

Like Spencer, Gaskell, and Madarasz, Palmer had mastered promotion as well as the pen. Since 1884 he had been publishing a monthly magazine, *The Western Penman*, as one way of promoting his method. And here is where my father reenters the picture.

Having left Cedar Rapids in 1893, after six months of study under Madarasz and Palmer, my father had been teaching in business colleges in the East and the Midwest. Palmer asked him to prepare a series of lessons on business handwriting for *The Western Penman*. He did, returning to Cedar Rapids in 1901, to teach for

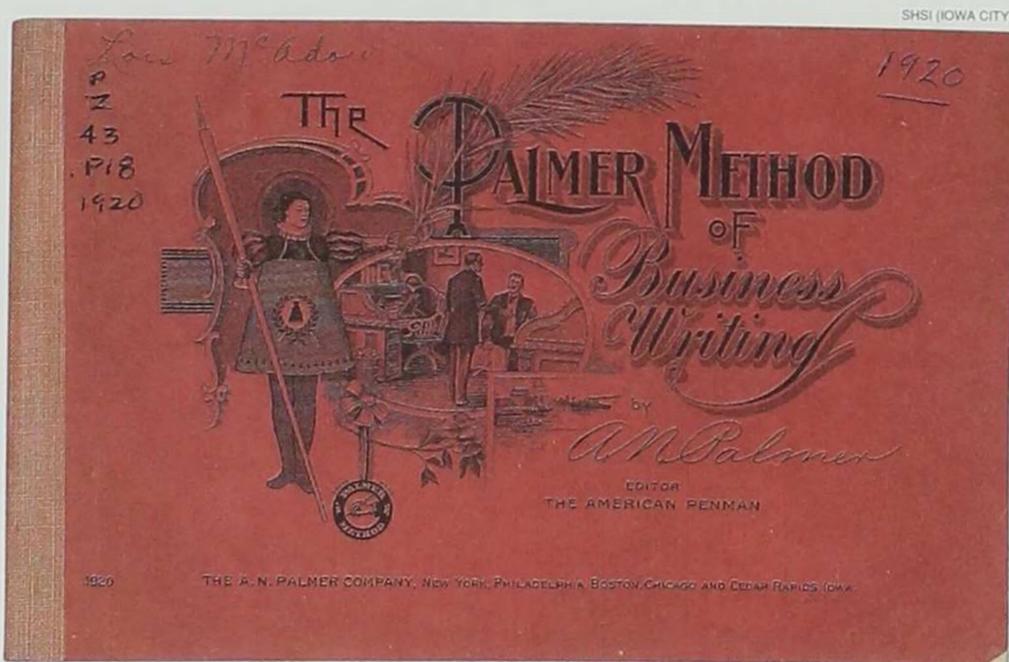
Palmer and to help operate the school. At the end of each day he would sit down to a stack of mail that he was to personalize. Palmer would approach quietly and watch Father's pen swing through the words "A. N. Palmer" on piece after piece of promotional mail.

Palmer was hard at work, trying to get the Palmer Method into schools. Circulation of *The Western Penman* had skyrocketed from 10,000 to 25,000 when a Catholic school administrator in Michigan invited him to teach the Palmer

Method to 200 nuns gathered for summer school. From this developed the "red book" (his standard adult instruction manual) and adoption in parochial schools.

Palmer's next victory was at Public School No. 4 in New York City in 1904. Interest was enormous. On some days, 500 educators crowded in to observe. Adoption of the Palmer Method from this point was swift, but certainly not without the constant urging of Palmer himself. Naturally enterprising, Palmer outstripped his competitors by getting teachers to come to learn his method during the summer months.

Although Palmer used the magazine—renamed *The American Penman* in 1907—to promote his method,



Palmer's "red books" became standard instruction manuals for his method of practical penmanship. Below: a few lessons.

LESSON 116—Drill 139

*Always study drill before practicing.*

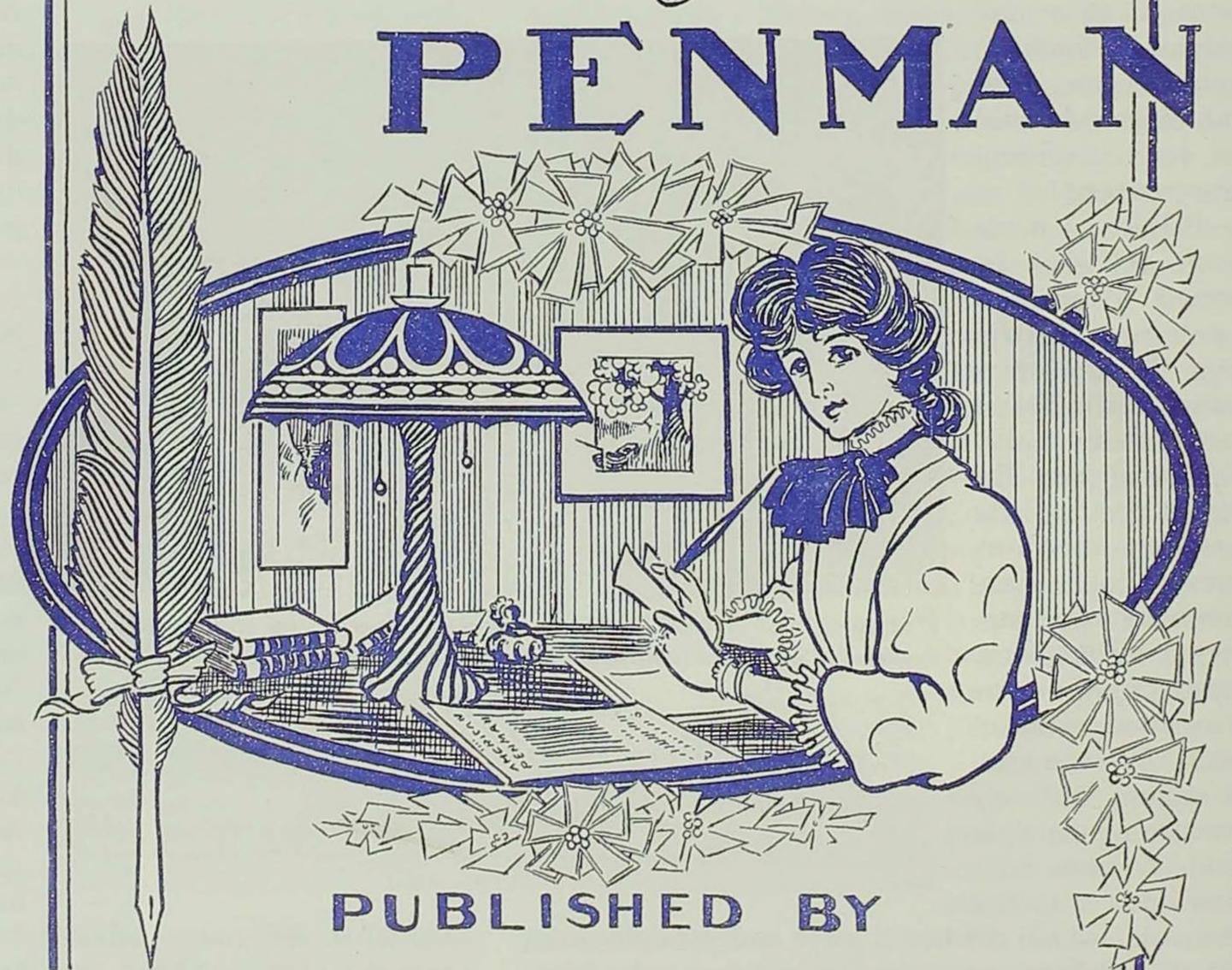
LESSON 117—Drill 140

*Be sure to use a good rapid movement.*

PROFESSIONAL EDITION

NOVEMBER, 1907

# The AMERICAN PENMAN



Published every month in Cedar Rapids, Palmer's *American Penman* magazine was filled with specimens submitted by students and teachers, advice from the experts, endorsements from the business world, and advertisements for typewriters, free-lance work, and writing supplies. In August of 1907, William C. Henning became associate editor.

PUBLISHED BY

## THE A.N. PALMER CO

### CEDAR RAPIDS

### IOWA.

V.G. Boyd

SUBSCRIPTION RATES { Student's Edition Sixty-five Cents per Year. In Canada 75 Cents  
Professional Edition One Dollar per Year. In Canada \$1.20

its columns were open to other fine penmen, such as C. P. Zaner and E. C. Mills with systems of their own to promote. But he made sure his own opinions were known. For a time "vertical writing," a European import, threatened to be widely adopted. Palmer, however, considered it slow and mannered and generally absurd. Vertical writing was soon a dead duck, and Palmer claimed credit for shooting it down.

He also took a few shots at his favorite enemy, the copybook system of teaching. Although the standard copybook began with directions on how to sit, hold the pen, and move the arm and hand, teachers too often taught penmanship by simply telling their pupils to copy the words at the top of every page. Palmer knew that learning penmanship required more than slavish copying of copybook models. He promised his subscribers that *The American Penman* would continue to offer every phase of penmanship instruction, expand into special editions for students and professionals, offer criticism, share news of professional gatherings, and devote special attention to ornamental script in its "Department of Flourishing."

Palmer had a good many other ideas for his magazine, his company, and for the world in general—but he had a train to catch for New York, where he was opening a new office. (Others were in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Portland, and Pasadena.) He left Cedar Rapids in 1907, and my father, seated at a rolltop desk, now found himself to be the new associate editor of *The American Penman*.

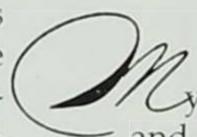
The editor's desk was a wonderful place for my father, who had dedicated his life to fine handwriting. He was in touch with the whole fraternity of penmen, who sent him courses on how to write and letter and specimens to be engraved for the magazine. And he did not hesitate to include courses of his own in ornamental writing, text lettering, and business penmanship.

My father was associate editor for five years, until *The American Penman* was moved to New York. He then became principal of Cedar Rapids Business College, which offered classes in typing, shorthand, and penmanship—as did most business schools—and sponsored Palmer Method summer sessions for teachers.

 With the adoption of printed forms, fewer companies were calling on penmen to hand-write contracts and insurance policies. But as my father knew, there were still other needs for fine handwriting. People brought in plaques to be engrossed, identifica-

tion cards to be written, dedications to be made in presentation Bibles, and certificates for text-lettering and script.

Although seasonal, the filling-out of diplomas gave many penmen all the work they could handle, as they told my father in their frequent correspondence with him. Even his old friend Francis Courtney supplemented his correspondence school income by preparing diplomas. As he mentioned in a letter to my father, "Last week I lettered eighty diplomas for Cleary of Ypsilante." Another colleague and friend, William E. Dennis, looked fondly toward the end of the diploma season: "Rushed to death with more diplomas. . . . I get out the 1st of July and bum around for 2 months so's 2 b in good trim for fall work."

 My father also prepared diplomas, for his school and others. While some were done at his office, most were done at home. As the diplomas were finished, he set them aside to dry on the table, the bed, the bookcase, in chairs, even on the floor. The room was strictly off limits to any pets in our family, as the creatures had ideas of their own about penmanship and might redistribute the ink with their feet.

There were other sources of income. Many prominent penmen were asked to examine handwriting—"expert work," they called it—which frequently led to testifying in court about whether the handwriting was spurious or genuine. As Courtney wrote, "Have had a lot of expert work this winter. Just finished a case for the German-American Bank of this city. Got fine write-ups in the daily papers here." In April of 1926 he told my father: "I have averaged so far this year five new cases a week." Cases big and small so occupied Courtney that in 1930 he worried, "I don't do enough writing to keep in fine trim."

Through his own "expert work" my father was in contact with lawyers throughout Iowa. Often there was an early morning rush, with traveling bag and stuffed briefcase, to catch the train to Elkader or Cherokee or Keokuk or some such place tucked away in a corner of the Hawkeye State. Later when I was old enough to help drive, I would go with him to these towns, where the cases always seemed to be tried in dimly lit courtrooms in antique courthouses, with the flies buzzing and the lawyers droning away on points of law beyond my comprehension.

By the 1950s and 1960s however, the state of penmanship was no longer flourishing. There had been a wretched decline in sensible methods of teaching penmanship in the schools, and the writers of truly fine

script—to say nothing of ornamental shaded script—had become few and were becoming fewer.

Lettering was in a quite different situation, especially broadpoint pen lettering (often called “calligraphy”). Interest in lettering classes was burgeoning, and drugstores sold calligraphy manuals and kits of supplies. Lettering is a deliberate, plodding sort of activity; you might compare it to walking. Speed is not much of a factor. It might take a calligrapher an hour, a day, to produce a large piece. Virtually all of the fine script writers also were good at broadpoint pen lettering, and for some it became their chief occupation. But good script writing is something special. It comes only through trained motion, and the movement is fast and complicated.

My father retained much of his handwriting skills well into his nineties. He occasionally practiced his script, writing large with a felt-tipped pen (the felt tip steadied his hand, and the large size was easier to see as his vision diminished). He had an idea one day that it might help if he regressed to the Palmer Method drills, the ovals and push-pulls, and he asked me to bring him a package of Palmer Method paper stashed away on a high shelf in his closet. But the paper was old and had so rotted that it fell apart with one fold.

After my father broke his hip, he spent much of his time in his kitchen. It was cozy and bright, and his wheelchair fit nicely at a big table where he could carry on his efforts to recapture his penmanship. When he was abed I searched his clothing and the floor for handwriting specimens he had dropped. His wheelchair usually had a good crop of cards and smaller bits of handwriting that I plucked from cracks

in the footrest, from between the spokes and under the cushion.

Summer 1971 came, and the International Association of Master Penmen and Teachers of Handwriting gathered in Cedar Rapids for my father’s 100th birthday. He had so looked forward to this that we speculated that once this was behind him, he might go into a rapid decline. He didn’t. Sometimes he tried to write, but by now that had failed him. But there was still fine writing to look at. That winter, I again piled the boxes of specimens on the kitchen table, and he looked them through and through, immersed in the vital stuff of his life.

One day I came across an object far back on a high shelf. It was a framed set of 14 cards, which the great Madarasz had done for my father in 1893. On each card, Madarasz had written my father’s name in an entirely different script. My father had treasured these, but he had not seen them for years, thinking that they had been lost.

I carried them into the kitchen. I did not thrust the cards on him all at once but just held them there, until, with his limited eyesight, he gradually became aware of what I had found.

“Madarasz! Oh, Madarasz!”

And when he could contain his excitement, the magnifying glass came out, he turned the cards this way and that, leaned close, traced the great swirls that by some magic produced a never-ending variety of capitals, and the tiny march of small letters, and again his world came alive. ❖



*The author, William E. Henning (1911-1996), was an artist and a writer. Under the federal New Deal projects in the 1930s he painted two Iowa murals: Iowa Farm Life at the Manchester Post Office, and Transportation at Harrison School in Cedar Rapids (which he restored in 1984). His best-selling novel The Heller (Scribner, 1947) is set in the Cedar Rapids area. In later years, the author developed a book-length manuscript on American penmen, drawing upon the unpublished memoirs of his father, William C. Henning, and upon his own association with his father’s Cedar Rapids Business College, where he taught shorthand until the school closed and his father retired in the mid-1940s. This article is a much abbreviated version of the manuscript and is published here with the generous permission of his widow, Bette Henning. (The flourished bird above is the work of his father.)*