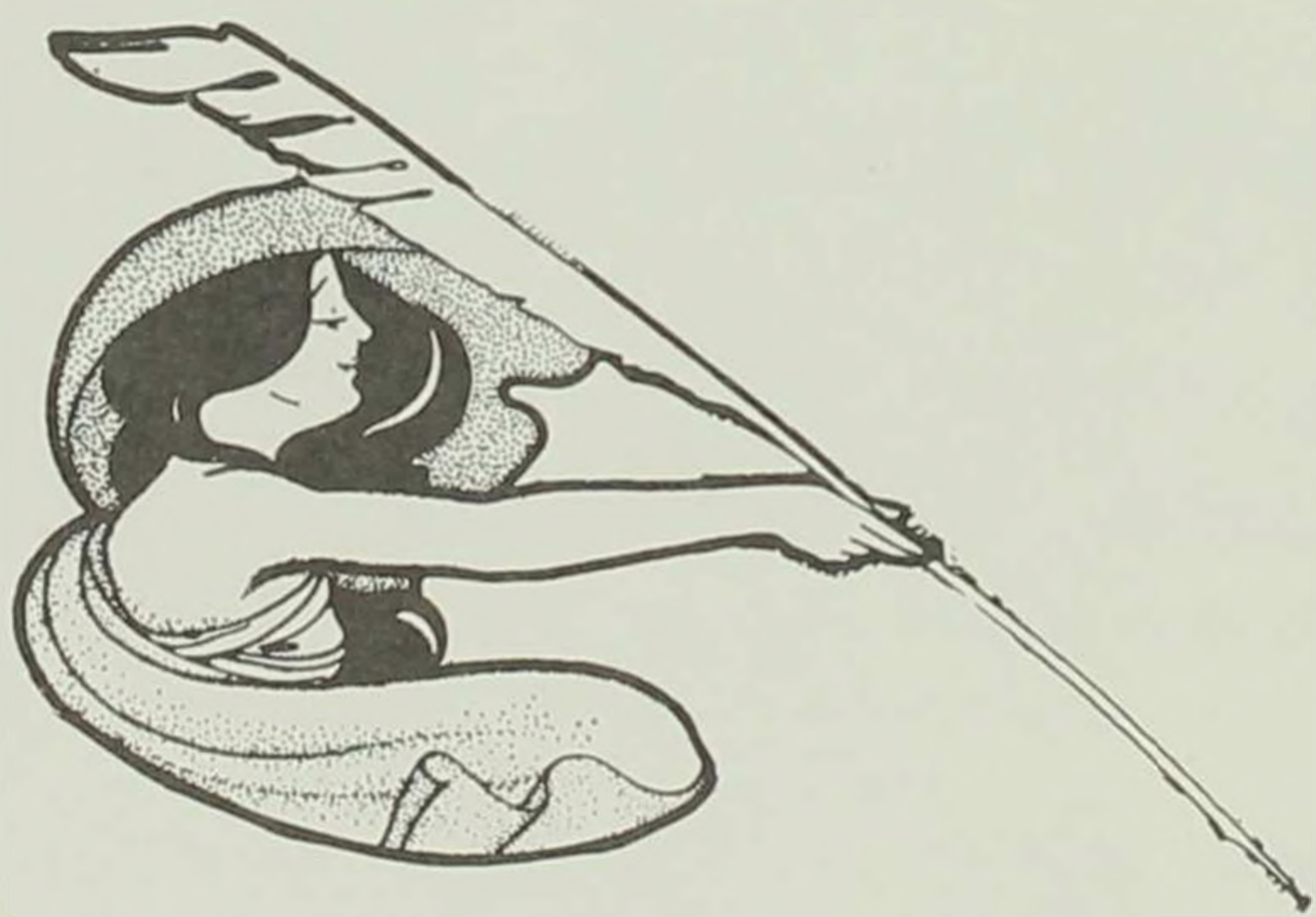


THE PENMAN BUILDS AN EMPIRE



by Robert E. Belding

For generations the Palmer Method of penmanship challenged the skill and patience of students in American grammar schools and business colleges. But Austin Norman Palmer devised his method—"legible, rapid, easy, and enduring"—as a modern alternative to the drudgery of traditional copy-book instruction. In the process, the Cedar Rapids educator earned a million dollars.

On the foundation of his innovative penmanship techniques, known as the Palmer Method, Austin Norman Palmer succeeded in building a nationally acclaimed chain of three business colleges based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. All of Palmer's highly touted and lucrative educational techniques—and all of his many products—grew out of a distinctive, handsome, and relaxed method of inscription that Palmer developed himself while still in his teens. Ultimately, Palmer owned, ran, and taught in three business schools, administered numerous correspondence courses and summer sessions, and established a bookstore that specialized in his Palmer-method pens, papers, and textbooks. His own publishing company held sole rights to *Palmer's Guide to Muscular Movement Writing*, which went through so many editions and was disseminated so widely that publishing firms bearing his name were established on the Pacific Coast and in New York City. The production of Palmer's handsomely ornamented penmanship diploma became almost a success unto itself, for he charged a special fee for the hand-decorated certificate.

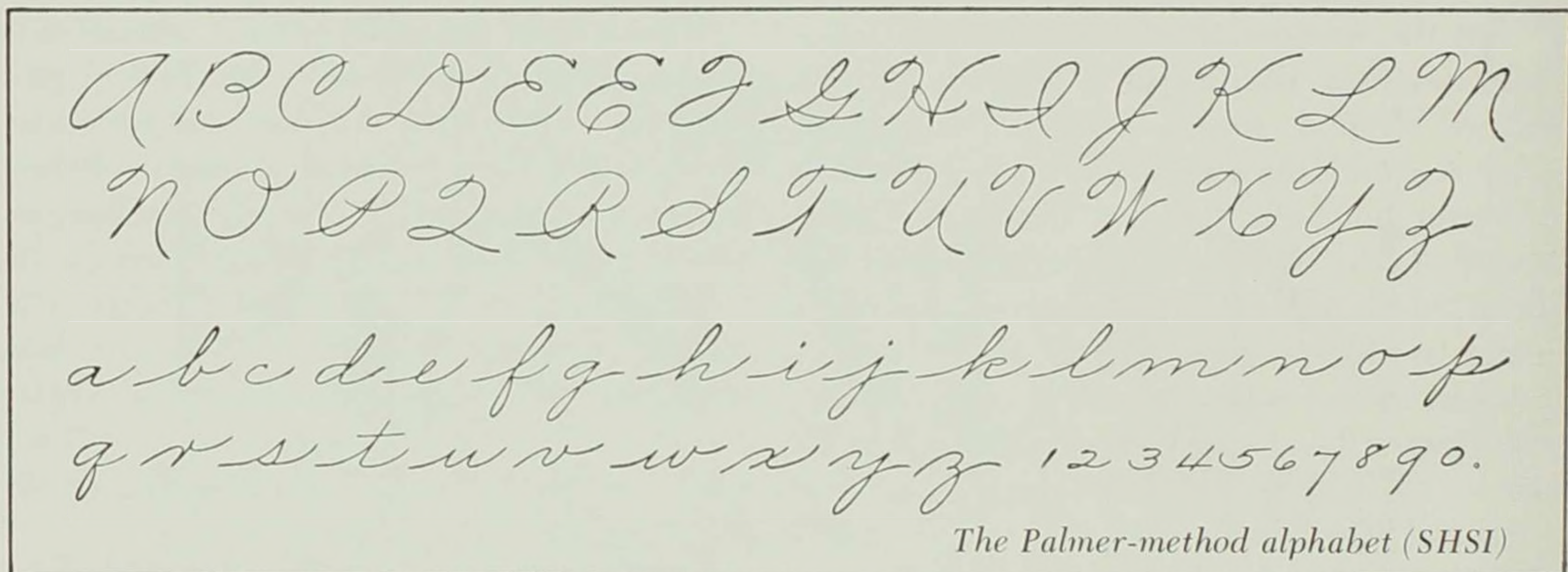
The agonies and rewards of learning the Palmer Method are vividly recalled by ex-pupils throughout the country. Fat ovals and gently leaning push-pulls were repeated by the clock or calendar as scholars rotated their arms in a circular motion which, some declared, wore raw the muscles below the elbow. Through it all, Palmer or his specially trained tutors soothed possible qualms by proclaiming that his free-flowing style, using the prescribed arm muscles, would never tire the hand. Palmer invented his unusual system in the early 1880s; it was nationally known and adopted by the turn of the century and proved highly contagious in public and in Roman Catholic schools across the nation in the decade from 1915 to 1925.

The Catholic parochial schools, almost as an entity, adopted the Palmer Method of penmanship earlier than did most tax-supported systems and then retained it longer. Palmer travelled extensively, helping the teaching sisters to guide their young charges' hands into muscle-supported scrolls and swoops. One middle-aged woman recalls, "How many thousand times did I write 'This is a specimen of my handwriting' before the sisters decided it was good enough to submit for a flowered certificate from Professor Palmer!"

Teachers conscientiously patrolled classroom aisles checking how the Palmer-produced pen was held, how Palmer's paper was levelled on the school desk, and even how the child was sitting—bent on combining circles with slanted strokes. The exercise was punctuated with staccato commands to "use your arm!" Nor could the teacher herself, who had inevitably been through Palmer's own inscriptions course, feel comfortable or even decently garbed without a framed certificate on the classroom wall and a current subscription to *Palmer's American Penmanship* on her desk.

Far from being only a slick entrepreneur out to cull as many fast bucks as there were suckers, Palmer was a man of integrity who taught more than a penmanship method at his Cedar Rapids school. He worked countless hours to develop his academy and its well-deserved reputation for producing versatile office workers, whose tailored combinations of study prepared them for immediate employment.

Like almost every teacher of business in the state, Palmer had come from the East. He was born in 1857 in New York State and studied in the local schools a system of Spencerian handwriting characterized by a slanting style. Even while learning this he declared that it was wearing out his hand under a tiring method of inscription. With his writing hand still in that



debilitated condition, he drifted into Cedar Rapids at the age of thirteen and became an insurance policy writer, using his free-flowing pen to inscribe and illuminate each policy. In 1884 he started teaching in the local business college which he was shortly to purchase. Although his downtown school experienced the same uncertain days of early development which characterized so many of Iowa's private schools, by 1892 Palmer had built up his institution into such an excellent one that he was able to form a company and purchase a business "university" in Saint Joseph, Missouri. With the other hand he tucked the Creston (Iowa) Business College under his corporate wing. Until his death in 1927, he remained principal owner of this three-campused corporation, which he called the Cedar Rapids Business College Company. He was most unusual in that he remained active in academic teaching and administration for a period of 43 years. Because of his many related involvements—especially in the area of business education—Palmer became not only the country's best known academy educator, but also its most successful. In 1927 he was buried in Cedar Rapids, leaving an estate of well over one million dollars.

Thanks to his school's thorough tutelage, stenographers were also taught to compose and type good business letters before leaving the school with diploma in hand. Palmer was aware

that few clerical jobs were so narrow as to require only a single set of skills, so his stenographers, in particular, became invaluable because they also learned to keep office accounts. The combination typist and shorthander was especially attractive to employers. In addition, it was never assumed that those entering his portals were already competent in basic English skills. Professor Palmer, knowing some had been through spelling and grammar without motivation, required that those who needed it should undergo the Common English Course in his school. Such an essentials course not only proved valuable to youths in his school, but also to many adults entering his institution.

A second package of courses offered by the Cedar Rapids school was perhaps unique to his institution and was essential to A.N. Palmer's dedication in spreading his distinctive gospel of flowing penmanship. This course he called the Normal Commercial. It offered training in penmanship and overall inscriptional techniques for all those aspiring to teach. In this sequence, either beginning or experienced teachers could learn how to chalk "both delicately and attractively" on the blackboard. The professor's view was that his human teaching products—whether they were to enter the ranks of parochial or public secondary schools, elementary-level institutions, or even business colleges or other forms of private schools—had

to be versatile individuals with an armament of "complete" packages: courses in bookkeeping, office business practice, inter-communication, and secretarial training. Also offered to those found deficient in various areas were business law, commercial arithmetic, rapid addition, business correspondence, "normal" penmanship (followed by "ornamental" writing), flourishing, and an elective called "pen art." All these contained courses incorporating instruction in how to get the subject across to students, and a general methods course applicable to all business teaching was also offered.

This "normal" or teacher training course provided a portion of Palmer's national reputation. Not only was it unique in covering so many areas of business education, it also provided summer courses for mature teachers. Roman Catholic parishes in particular sent their teachers to Cedar Rapids to perspire through the summer programs. As many as two hundred teachers arrived each summer from 1913 to 1925, and Palmer's welcoming words to

all became famous: "You cannot teach what you do not know." The master teacher's own on-the-spot research conducted during his non-stop penmanship lecture circuits yielded proof that the properly trained business teacher could command better pay and enjoy a variety of job offers that other aspiring teachers did not share. For adolescents of both sexes he advertised: "Here is a very attractive opportunity for ambitious young people." His correspondence courses garnered a half-million customers from across the country. Palmer's own bookstore operated as part of his Cedar Rapids enterprise and held a monopoly on all equipment required for his courses.

Another publicized attraction of the Cedar Rapids Business College and its affiliates was the array of jobs that students held while undertaking the courses. Each college had part-time positions in the school's banks where tellers, cashiers, and bookkeepers were em-

HAND, FINGER, AND PENHOLDER STUDIES



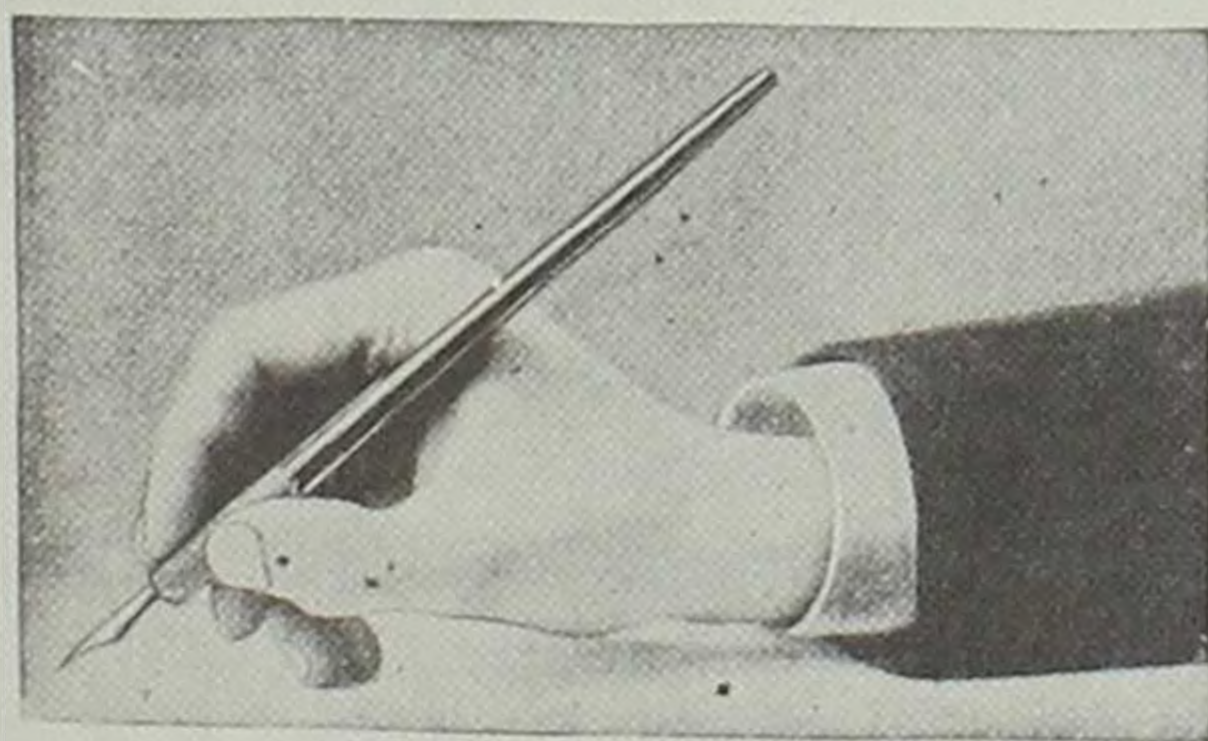
No. 7

STUDY closely the illustrations on this page. In number 7, the fingers bend naturally as in repose, and their positions should remain the same when the penholder is in the hand.

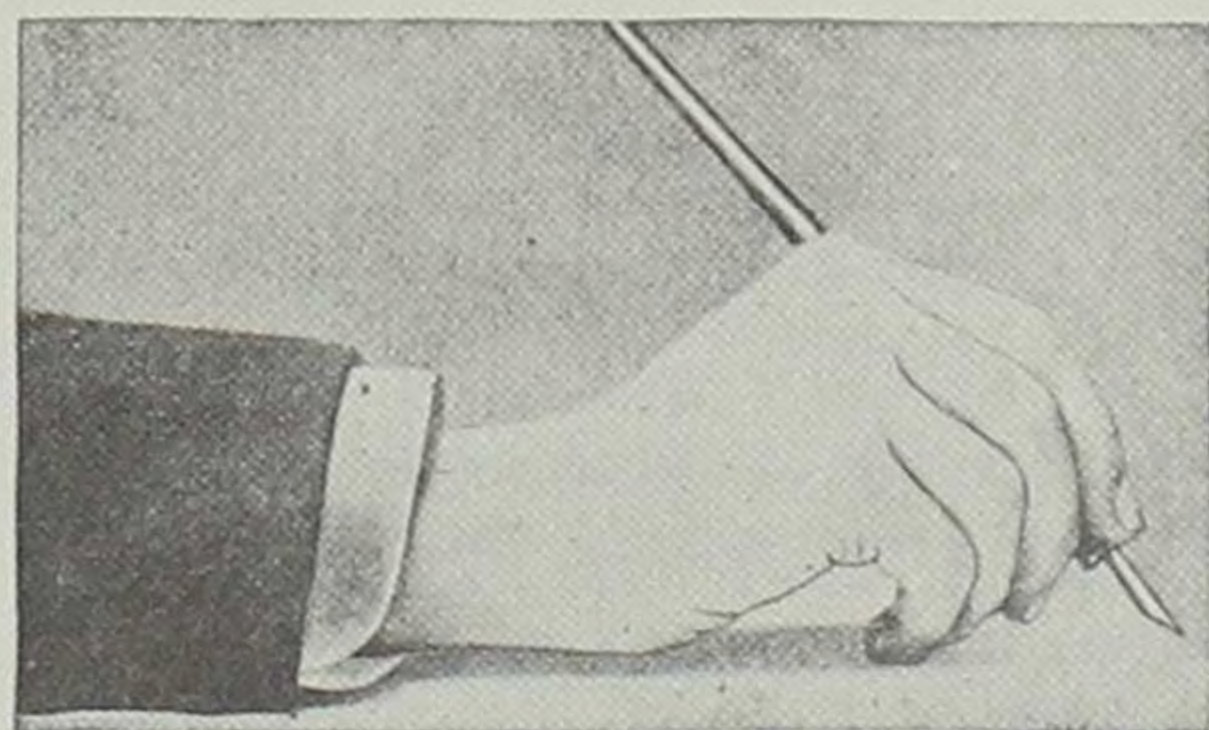
In numbers eight, nine and ten you should study the relation of the penholder to the hand. As you see, it is a little below the knuckle joint. The first finger bends naturally, and rests on top of the holder about one inch from the point of the pen; the thumb rests on the holder nearly opposite the first joint of the first finger, and the third and fourth fingers are bent, touching the paper and forming a movable rest. Whether these fingers bend exactly as the illustrations show will depend upon their shape and length. It does not matter whether they rest on the nails or sides, if they are comfortable and can be used easily as the movable rest.



No. 8



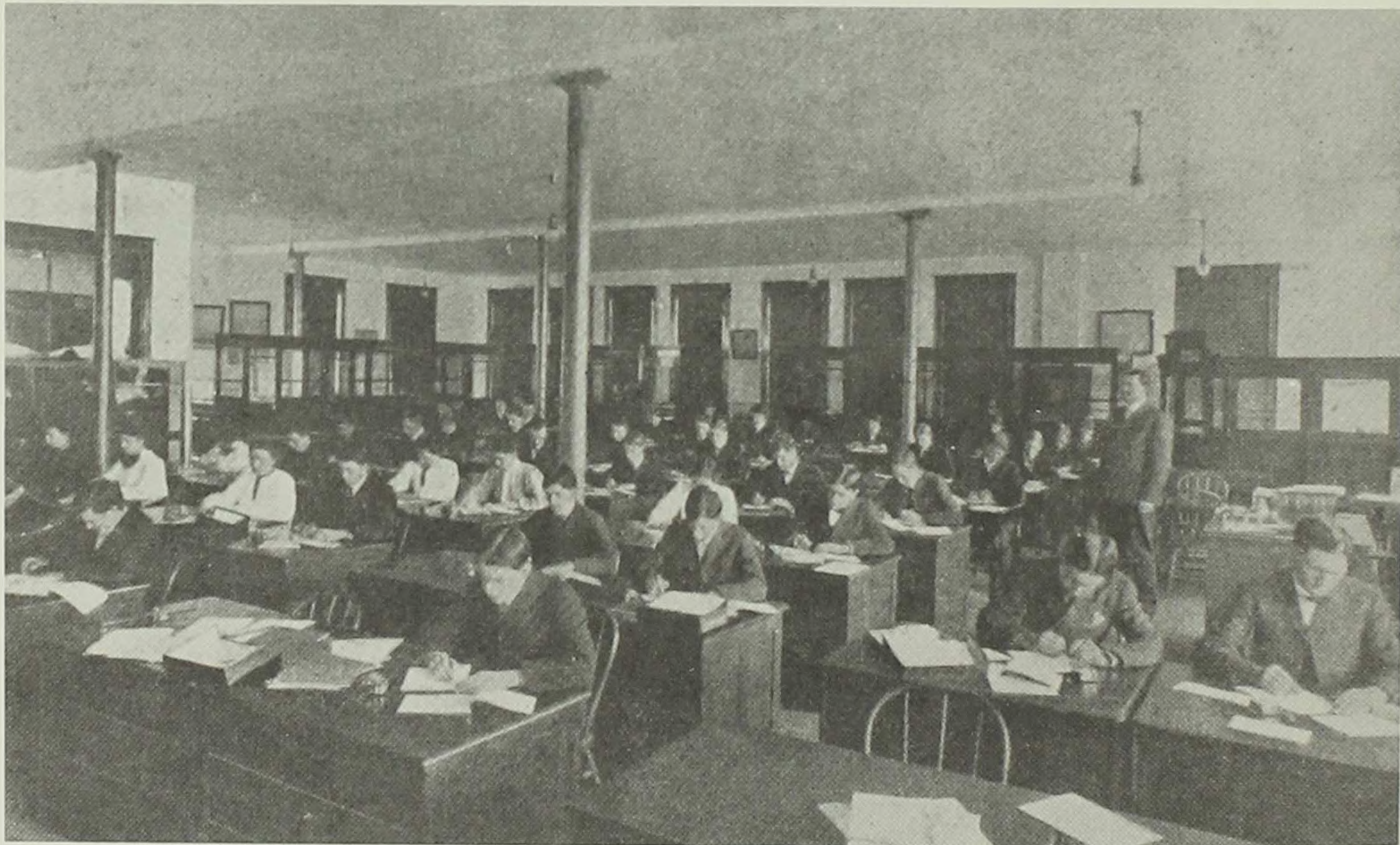
No. 9



No. 10

The Penman: Austin Norman Palmer demonstrates the proper technique (SHSI)

It is not so much the amount of practice as the kind of practice that counts.



It is the constant effort to acquire precision that leads to success in writing.

Learning by doing: penmanship drill in a Palmer classroom. The master often reminded his students, "A few minutes in the right way are worth hours of practice in the wrong way."

employed, or in the institution's bookstore, handling all Palmer products for over-the-counter sales and for the vast number of mail-order requests from correspondence students. All these positions were held exclusively by students attending the college. In addition, each of the three communities where the schools were established maintained independent business offices to give students experiences in wholesale accounts, in real estate and insurance, in commission computations, and in freight office books.

An unusual and successful aspect of the Cedar Rapids Business College Company was

its close link to its two cousin schools. Palmer established an intercommunication plan by which students would gain experience at one school while carrying on a "wholesale commission and banking" business with students in his other two schools. To complement this, each school featured "telegraph employment" by which students trained at one school might be placed in the geographic area of another school. Managers of the operation proudly pointed out that Palmer graduates of the comprehensive shorthand course readily found jobs, and most alumni had a wide selection of attractive employment opportunities to choose from.

The Palmer Method of Business Writing

W. M. Palmer
ORIGINATOR AND AUTHOR

Advanced Course

This certifies that

Jack Watson

has completed the lessons in The Business and High School Edition of The Palmer Method of Business Writing, and, having satisfactorily passed the required Examination, is hereby awarded this

Certificate for Superior Ability

in Rapid Muscular Movement Commercial Penmanship.

Given at Chicago, Ill., on this 2nd day of June 1930



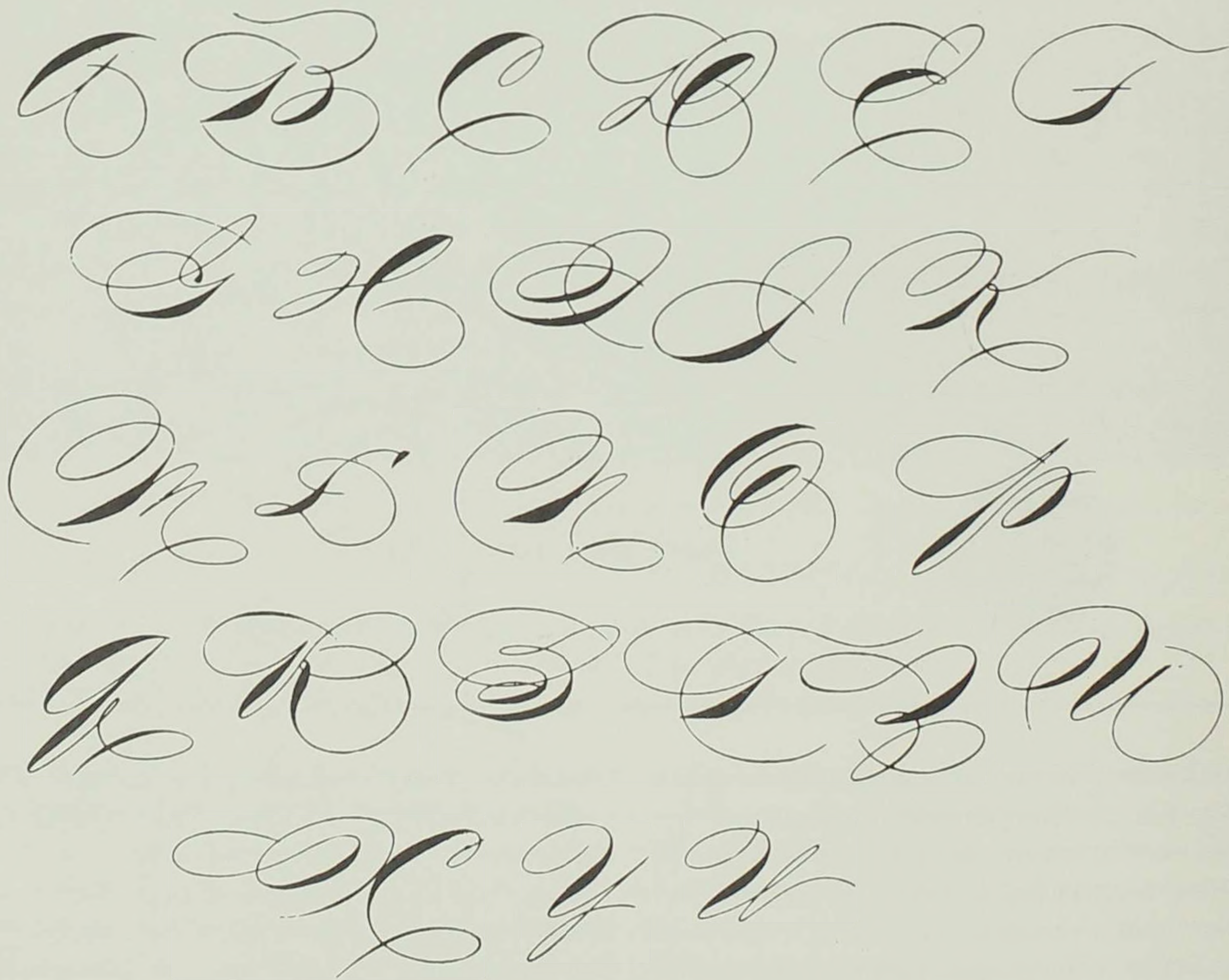
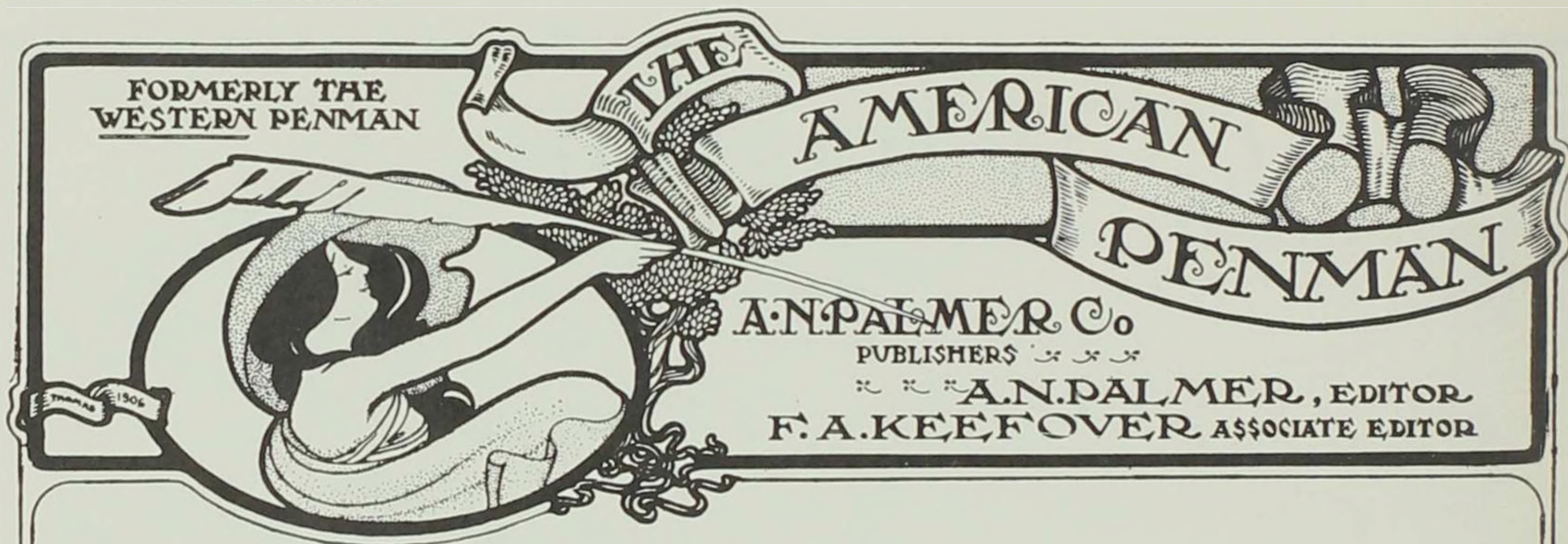
BOARD OF AWARDS

W. M. Palmer
C. J. Newcomb
A. A. Davis

The modest chain of schools maintained equal pride in the personal supervision accorded each student. In a day when public education and academies were forced into becoming mass enterprises, Palmer's teachers made sure that the program fitted each student and that the speed of progress was neither too accelerated nor too slow for the individual. This sensitive pacing for each student was reflected in the "scholarship" statement of the school's *Prospectus*. Palmer's own words indicate that no lump scholarships were awarded because some students got the best from a single term of attendance while others needed an entire

academic year to achieve a comparable goal. Under such varied conditions Palmer felt it was unfair to offer continuing subsidies.

The word "scholarships" actually had an unusual meaning; students could benefit by paying their own "scholarships." If the student prepaid a package sum at the start, embracing all tuition, board and room, book rentals, supply purchases, and fuel for the room, he or she obtained a lower rate of "scholarship fee." Should a student be compelled to interrupt studies, he or she could re-enter the school on the prepaid scholarship without paying any increased cost or re-entry fee.



The American Penman, Palmer's monthly magazine, not only propounded correct business style but also covered current developments in calligraphy. Shown here is an alphabet contributed to the magazine in 1907 by F.B. Courtney (SHSI)

Rates for attendance in any of the three schools were almost identical. It was made clear that fees were for a full month of attendance rather than for four weeks. The initial three months of tuition cost \$10 per month; this was reduced to \$8 for the second three, and to \$7 for each month thereafter. If a block of three months was paid in advance, further package savings of approximately 25 percent would accrue.

All students paid their board and room—if needed—through the school office, yet dormitories were never a part of the school. Instead, the administration ferreted out “respectable families” willing to take youthful boarders and roomers at the school’s established fee. Thirteen weeks of board could be had for \$25 and rooms were assigned in comparable homes for \$2.50 per month. Fuel for rented rooms cost \$9 per winter. The bundled rate for all books and supplies was established at \$10, including personal stationery for writing home, but all had to be purchased at the Palmer-run store. The final fee was for the school’s diploma; its margins alone were worth the dollar charge, for here was a “natural” adornment of birds and flowers.

Palmer himself advised students to get into wise business habits by conserving personal income. “Start your prudence here at school,” he exhorted. Well-worn phrases from Palmer’s lips that were often repeated by students were: “Save rather than speculate!” “Spend for intellectual and physical development, not for luxury and amusement!” “Do not carry loose change, but deposit it in the school and withdraw it when needed!”

Other anticipated or actual idiosyncrasies of the school’s operation were reflected in its policy. It is apparent that all three colleges encountered problems in getting students to

enter in early September, the start of the academic year. The common *Prospectus* advised that those who appeared the first week in September would receive their initial two weeks of tuition free. Further verbal encouragement came at this point: “The first week in September will be the most excellent time to begin a course in any of our schools.”

An energetic, effective teacher and administrator, Palmer built a small empire of business colleges with all operations centered in Cedar Rapids. Penmanship, the initial spark for his school, was ignited and spread across the country, through most public and private schools. His overall influence was two-fold: a national name built on his penmanship operation and its publishing facilities and national acclaim for his business college operation and its network of correspondence and summer instruction. Little wonder his business college was the best known and one of the longest lasting private secondary schools in Iowa. Here was useful education at its best. □

Note on Sources

Sources with helpful information about Palmer and his business schools include J. Shrock, “Rise and Progress of Business Education in Iowa,” *Annals of Iowa*, VII (July 1869), 296; Joseph S. Taylor, “A. N. Palmer: An Appreciation,” *Educational Review*, LXXVI (June 1928), 15-20; and *Prospectus and Calendar, Cedar Rapids Business College* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The College, 1892), 5. William Duffy, “Push and Pull, Push and Pull, Hit the Line Every Time,” *The Cedar Rapids Gazette*, March 27, 1965, provides details about Palmer’s penmanship techniques. See also: Frances Craig, “Oh, Oh Kids, the Palmer Method is Back,” *Des Moines Register*, March 12, 1967, and A. N. Palmer, “Business Schools Owned and Managed by the Western Business College Company,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 18, 1892.