

Take a Letter

The fingers of the official reporter at the Johnson County courthouse fly over the keys of his stenotype machine, noting every plea and accusation, every question and answer. A young secretary in an office at the University Hospital follows the rapid dictation of the physician as she records in Gregg shorthand the history of a case. In a downtown Iowa City office an older woman, working now that her children are away, takes shorthand by the Pitman method which she learned twenty-five years ago. With earphones clamped on her head and her feet manipulating the pedals of a dictaphone, the secretary in a University office transcribes on her typewriter the correspondence recorded the night before. Such are the secretaries of 1948.

Few outsiders realize how much hospitals, schools, government, and industry depend on these secretaries, how much credit must be given to them, or how slow has been the evolution of their training. Words making modern history — judges' decisions, politicians' speeches, ministers' sermons, lawyers' pleadings, businessmen's letters, even entire newspapers — are being re-

corded efficiently and accurately by the indispensable secretary — the clerk or amanuensis who keeps secrets.

Although ingenious machines and complicated techniques have greatly extended the modern secretary's skill and speed, the otherwise fleeting words of men have been captured and recorded ever since the beginning of history. The ancient Greeks experimented with short cuts in writing and Cicero's lowly slave-secretary, Marcus Tullius Tiro, invented a shorthand system almost two thousand years ago. Even Emperor Julius Caesar is said to have attempted to learn to write this shorthand. But Tiro's shorthand system — the *Notae Tironoanae* — was lost with the fall of the Roman empire and the emergence of the new languages, and it was almost 1400 A.D. before his ancient manuscripts were discovered by an abbot at the Spanheim monastery and it was another three hundred years before anyone deciphered these manuscripts.

In the meantime, the awakened intellectual curiosity which followed the Renaissance led to a new interest in writing. Men's minds moved faster than their fingers. In 1588 Dr. Timothy Bright, an English physician, published a treatise entitled *Characterie* in which he presented a system of "short, swift, and secret writing in character." In

that age of intrigue it may be that the "secret" was as important as the "short, swift". The idea of short cuts in writing took root in England, but it was not until 1837 that Isaac Pitman of Bath devised a new and more successful system of shorthand, based on representations of the sounds in words. He used a sign for each sound, making light and heavy strokes to distinguish "paired sounds" — including such letter combinations as th and ng.

Pitman's system continued in general use up to the 1920's, but half a century after Pitman announced his new shorthand method, still another Englishman, John Robert Gregg of Liverpool, developed what was to become the standard system for our modern secretarial technique. Gregg introduced his shorthand system to America in 1893 and it is still the most popular method used in the United States, England, India, and Mexico. Gregg shorthand is taught in almost all American colleges and business schools. In 1940, an American, Charles H. Thomas, a former teacher of Gregg shorthand, developed a system of his own and published a textbook entitled the *Thomas Method of Shorthand*.

With the mechanization of industry came attempts to record the spoken word by machines, and various recording devices came on the market.

One of these was the dictaphone, a variation of the phonograph, by which the words are recorded and the secretary types from the record. Another invention is the stenotype, a machine on which the operator types a system of shorthand. These machines, however, are expensive and few secretaries or offices can afford to purchase them.

Meanwhile men were working along another line — mechanical writing, using some form of the type used by printers. As early as 1714 an English inventor patented a writing machine, the forerunner of the typewriter of today. Many machines based on the movable type used by printing offices were invented but it was not until 1875 that the first typewriter appeared on the market. The trilogy of making records and writing letters was complete — dictation, shorthand, and typing.

Iowa and Iowa City, only a little more than a century old, have witnessed this evolution of secretarial techniques. Robert Lucas, the first Governor of the Territory of Iowa, brought with him from Ohio as his secretary, young Theodore Sutton Parvin. There is nothing to indicate that Parvin knew any shorthand; he was, rather, an amanuensis and confidante. Unfortunately for research workers of today, Lucas wrote most of his letters in longhand. If duplicate copies were desired, a very thin sheet of nearly transparent paper was

placed over the manuscript to be copied, dampened slightly, and some pressure was applied, until a readable facsimile of the letter or other manuscript appeared through the thin sheet. These copies were frequently bound together in "letter books".

It was not long, however, before trained bookkeepers and secretaries were in demand in Iowa City. In 1865 "Professor" J. Shrock opened the "Spencerian Writing Academy" in Iowa City. This, apparently, was intended to train young men for office work by improving their penmanship. The first school for business training in Iowa City seems to have been the Iowa City Commercial College, opened in September, 1866, by J. T. Craig. On October 2, 1866, the college was combined with the Spencerian Writing Academy under the partnership of Craig and Shrock.

In the fall of 1867 William McClain purchased the Writing Academy and the Commercial College and consolidated them into one institution. Three years later he divided his school, this time having a cultural section — the Iowa City Academy — and a business school which retained the name, Iowa City Commercial College. McClain took charge of the Academy and supervised the Commercial College which was directed by a principal.

In 1875 F. R. Williams succeeded C. R. Rogers

as principal of the Iowa City Commercial College and after McClain's death in 1877 Williams conducted the college for the estate until 1878 when he purchased it. Three years later, F. R. Williams and his brother, J. H. Williams, entered into partnership and the college continued under their supervision until it ceased to function in 1905.

The 1871-1872 catalogue of this Iowa City Commercial College offered "Full scholarships, including Book Keeping, Commercial Law, Commercial Arithmetic and Business Penmanship . . . \$45.00". For "Ladies and Disabled Soldiers" the fee was \$10.00 less. It is interesting to note here that seventy-five years later women no longer need such encouragement to attend schools of higher education, whereas veterans of World War II are being given a financial incentive to study. Instruction in "Ornamental Penmanship" and "Short Hand Writing" was given at "reasonable rates". Under "General Remarks" the catalogue had this to say: "Iowa City has become one of the great educational centres of the West. . . . the high moral character of those who assemble here from year to year to pursue their studies . . . make it a very desirable place of residence. . . . Its location is remarkably pleasant and healthy."

One reason the Iowa City Commercial College closed in 1905 may have been the competition of-

ferred by another business college, founded by Hannah Elizabeth Irish, a pioneer among women in business. Miss Irish was a graduate of McClain's Iowa City Academy and had had wide experience in business offices in Iowa and California. She is said to have been the first woman stenographer in Iowa City and the first woman in Iowa City to use a telephone. She opened the doors of her school in August, 1895.

Smith's directory of Iowa City and Johnson County for 1897-1898 ran an advertisement in which Miss Irish offered to "Every Boy and Girl (and older people, too)" a six-months course in shorthand and typewriting for thirty dollars, nine months for forty dollars. Students could enroll for shorthand alone or typewriting alone for five dollars per month. The Pitman method of shorthand was taught exclusively until 1908 when one student started to learn the Gregg system.

Iowa Citians remember Elizabeth Irish as a strict teacher and a businesslike woman, received on a par with her men associates, but she had many hobbies and knew how to have fun. One of the former teachers at the Irish Business College recalls that students came at 8:00 a.m. and the doors were then locked until noon. At 1:30 — or whenever Miss Irish finished her lunch — the doors reopened and students were again locked in

until 4:00 p.m. No one was permitted to leave during school hours and the tardy were out of luck. A student, later an Iowa City insurance dealer and real estate broker, is said to have escaped the rigors of such training by climbing down the fire escape.

The Irish Business College continued to train students until December, 1940, when Miss Irish retired. During those 45 years, more than 12,000 students were enrolled. Except for the 10 years (1924-1934) that Brown's Commerce College was operated by J. White Brown, Miss Irish had no commercial competition in Iowa City from 1905 to 1940.

Elizabeth Irish sold her school in 1940 and it was operated for a number of years under the management of William F. Morrison, an attorney. In June, 1946, the present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. McCabe, purchased the school and equipment and renamed it the Iowa City Commercial College. Mr. McCabe received his training at the University of Iowa and Coe College in Cedar Rapids. His wife is a graduate of Brown's Commerce College.

Approximately seventy-five students, of whom thirty were veterans, enrolled in the 1947-1948 term. Six full courses are offered and the veteran rate (paid by the Veterans' Administration) for

the stenographic course is now \$280 per nine months of training. For the secretarial course (10 months) the fee is \$325. Non-veteran students are charged \$25 per month, with books and supplies extra. Night classes are available to students unable to attend during the day.

The schools in Iowa City did not include commercial education in the course of study until 1918 when University students were offered a stenographic course in the University High School, to be taken without college credit. In 1925 "stenography" became a part of the College of Commerce curriculum, with credit. Not until February, 1947, was even partial credit given for typing. In 1920 shorthand and typing were, for the first time, offered in the Iowa City public schools.

Since July, 1947, there has been an Iowa City chapter of the international honorary business sorority, Alpha Iota, and in November, 1947, the fraternity, Phi Theta Pi, was organized. Social and educational events are planned by these organizations for members. Membership is restricted to persons who are high school graduates and have attained a grade average of 90 or above in their business courses.

Cartoonists like to represent stenographers and secretaries, now usually young women, as gum-chewing, rattle-brained sirens, addicted to relax-

ing on the boss's knee; but the office worker of today is, in most cases, a trained woman who works hard from 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (or later), uses her head when some employer occasionally loses his, keeps track of business and personal appointments, and, contrary to popular belief, keeps office secrets. But even the most efficient secretary seldom thinks of the many men and women who have contributed to her skill and efficiency — of Tiro, Pitman, Gregg, and the inventors of the machines she uses, as day after day she responds cheerfully to the words heard millions of times in modern offices over the land — "Take a letter, please, Miss Jones".

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