

He puts poetry into penmanship

# A man of letters — fancy ones

By Jerry Johnston  
Deseret News staff writer

"A" to "Z," Maurice Scanlon just may be the finest artist in the state. Each letter of the alphabet's a poem to him; he's a letterer — not so much a dying profession these days as vory select one. And Maurice Scanlon is a fine example why.

Maurice Scanlon's most ambitious lettering job was for this poster-sized version of "The Lord's Prayer."

Artistic Handwriting — which Scanlon feels is unfairly lumped under "calligraphy" or "pretty penmanship" goes back thousands of years. In China, for instance, it has ranked above other arts for centuries. The Greeks, when impressed with a text, would make hand-copied manuscripts of it for their libraries.

At the end of the 19th century fine writing experienced a revival — a fact several historians see as a reaction to a mechanized society. With

automation rampant as ever today, perhaps we'll be seeing a surge in the craft again. Scanlon seems to think so, and if a wave of good writing comes he'll be right on the crest.

"Many modern designers haven't been trained in lettering," he points out. "They're content with good typography. As letterers we're searching for perfection. And that means pleasing ourselves."

For Scanlon, the search has been going on for many years. He wasn't an outstanding penman in school, but he claims penmanship has little to do with lettering. He lettered signs for ZCMI for awhile, then moved to California. In Los Angeles he worked at lettering jobs for 34 years, developing and improving. Today, back in Utah, he's called on for jobs ranging from the cover of "Brigham Young University Studies" to a logo for the "Salt City Jail." His style is classic, clean and firmly rooted in good technique.

"Actually there are only three basic styles," he points out. "Spencerian lettering, built up lettering, and calligraphy."

But to the pro, there's a world of difference among them.

Calligraphy is basically nice handwriting. It is done with a wedge-shaped instrument (pen, pencil, brush) and entails writing with the same pressure and letting the shape of the writing point make the lines wide or thin.

The Spencerian form, however, is to calligraphy as "checkers" is to "chess." Spencerian lettering is for the expert. It is done with an oblique pen (a pen with the point set on an angle off to the side of the shaft) and hand-pressure determines the width of the lines.

Built up lettering is simply Spencerian lettering that has been enlarged by some mechanical means and then "painted" in.

Currently Scanlon is teaching a class at the University of Utah that includes all three styles — a class that has doubled in enrollment this year.

"The Spencerian style is most difficult for them," he says, "every little heartbeat shows up in Spencerian. You have to stop breathing to write it."

That is the pitfall — and also the charm of it. When Maurice Scanlon begins lettering there is the sense of a fine sculptor, painter or musician at work. Tedious, demanding, exhausting, the work wears a person down quickly. But the result, when it's done correctly, has a human quality to it that is often a key to fine art. A line from the Encyclopedia Britannica perhaps describes it best:

*The line traced by a skilled calligrapher is a marvel of fluidity and sensitive inflection, communicating the very action of the Master's hand."*

Along with the fine touch of art, comes much of the preoccupations as well.

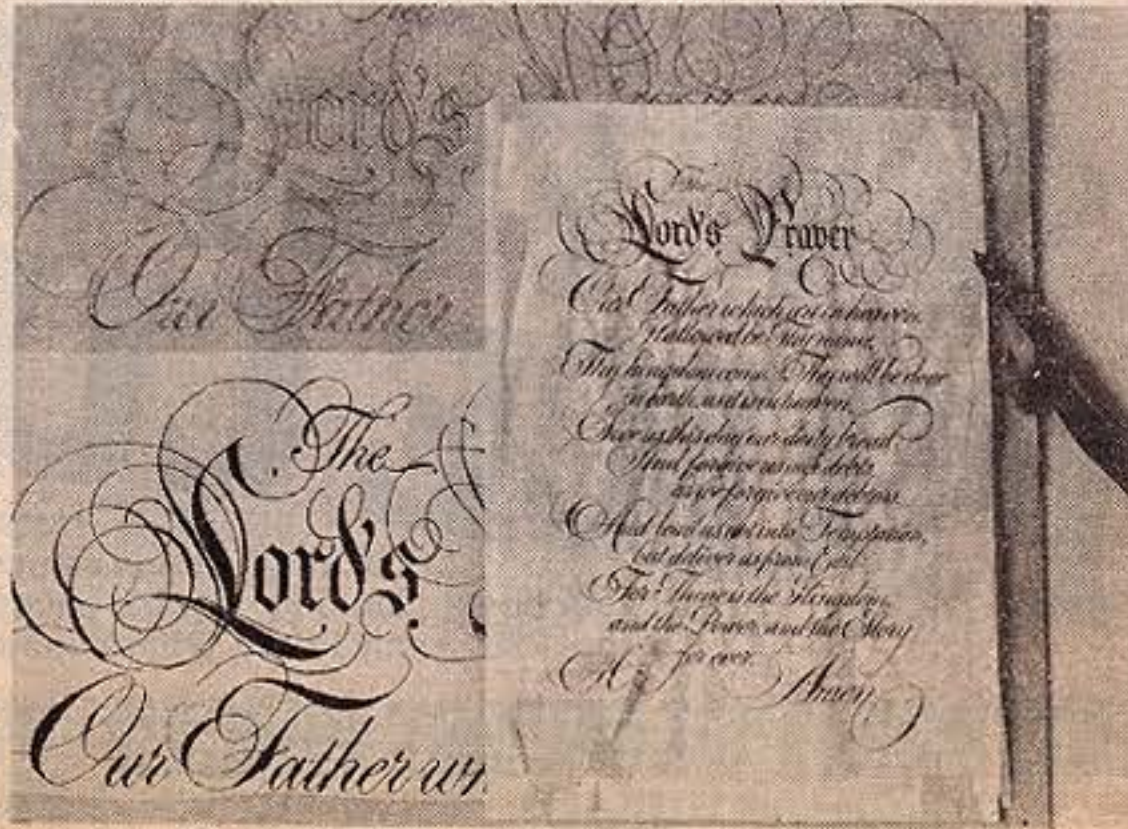
"I've known 25 lettering masters over the years, and each one was different — except in one thing: They were never satisfied. They were perfectionists.

"Time and time again I'll be delivering some-

At right: Maurice Scanlon uses a "wedge" tool to show difference between the Spencerian and calligraphy type of lettering. The photograph below shows the process behind a work of art: the original Spencerian page (right), enlarged (behind) and then inked in (left).



Deseret News photos by Don M. Graydon



Lettering has always been Maurice Scanlon's first love. He is the

master of the Spencerian alphabet, not to be confused with callig-

raphy. Since he was a child, he's known what he wanted to do.