

Mastering Spencerian alphabet's uphill work

By Ann Kilbourn
Lifestyle Writer

Mastering the Spencerian alphabet is uphill work.

It is more than catching on to the basic ups, downs and arounds of the standard A B Cs. In the 1800s, Platt Rogers Spencer developed a type of penmanship that is no longer taught in elementary schools.

It was taught 100 years ago, which explains the ornate, disciplined handwriting of that time.

Lettering has always been Maurice Scanlon's first love.

"Ever since I was young, I have known that it is what I wanted to do," he confessed.

In grade school, his teachers loved him because his writing was legible, easy to read.

In Script

"I wrote papers in script," he explained. "It seems I have been doing this forever."

It hasn't actually been forever, just long enough for Mr. Scanlon to acquire a steady hand and a proficiency in Spencerian roundhand. His profession and his passion for the "written word" glide together as smoothly as the letters of Spencer's alphabet.

People who learn the skill of any ornate style of handwriting must memorize the process of making each letter. There are several basic strokes for each letter. And all strokes in the Spencerian roundhand style are worked "up hill." Memorizing the style of each is necessary, Mr. Scanlon said.

As to the number of different alphabets to be memorized, he added that each penman's individual style is reflected in his work.

There are as many alphabets as there are writers.

Mr. Scanlon's first job was lettering show cards for a Salt Lake department store. Show cards were the pieces of cardboard that listed item prices.

Self-taught as a professional card letterer, Mr. Scanlon did attend art school initially.

"I went to art school but never got caught up in the art business. I was more interested in scripts and letters."

He left his job as a show card artist and went to Los Angeles to work. He considers his 29 years free-lancing in California his schooling. When he

returned to Salt Lake City 19 years ago, he felt he was still mastering his craft.

Calligraphy is a term that has been allowed to define too many types of lettering. The strokes in calligraphy are different from those used in Spencerian script. In addition, the type of pen nib used to achieve each stroke is different. With Spencerian roundhand, an oblique pen nib and penholder are used. This oblique nib facilitates the thick and thin strokes of this particular alphabet.

Mr. Scanlon believes that after many years, much time, and countless hours of application, he now has the oblique pen nib under control.

If he had decided to remain in Salt Lake as "just another card stripper," Mr. Scanlon says he never would have been content.

After years free-lancing in Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, he said he doesn't tire of his work.

Always Different

"I love the work. It is a job where you start over every morning. Your work is never the same. It is always different, always challenging."

He prefers working free-lance to working as an employee. "I will always work free-lance. It is too difficult to do this type of work on a schedule or deadline."

His work is sought by art directors when ornate or unusual lettering is part of an advertising layout. He doesn't work by the hour.

"When the art director and I are both satisfied with the work I have done, then it is complete. I do it over until I am pleased with the results. The finer the work involved, the better I like it," he explained.

The art of Spencerian roundhand is a disciplined, detailed skill, he continued.

"I have requests from people who think I can just sit down and whip off an invitation or quotation in a few hours," he said. Realistically speaking, the final product is the result of hours of precision lettering and, when necessary, relettering.

"I had a man ask if I would copy a poem about a horse that had died. I am sure he thought it would only take me an hour or so. If he had realized the time and the cost, he wouldn't have asked," Mr. Scanlon said.

"I sometimes have girls call and ask if I will do the

lettering for their wedding invitations," he continued. "I say no, mostly out of sympathy for their fathers. They couldn't afford to pay what I would have to charge."

The ornate scrolls, circles and swirls that are a part of a type of elegant lettering have a title of their own. Such script is comprised of "built-up" letters, he said. Built-up letters are constructed in segments and allow room for individual expression. Mr. Scanlon said that a built-up letter is not done in a series of strokes like regular script. It is, as the name implies, elegant additions to an alphabetical theme. You begin with a simple unadorned letter and transform it into a work of art.

Only a devoted professional would invest the time necessary to complete such work. When construction of letters is complete, built-up to the artist's satisfaction, it can actually be considered a work of art.

His position as a master of the oblique pen nib is not crowded by others equally skilled. He occasionally calls himself the "village scribe." It is unfortunate that more people aren't interested in script and fine lettering, he says. But he suspects that people in general have neither the interest nor the devotion to achieve any level of accomplishment.

Fast and Efficient

Typewriters are fast and efficient but there aren't any that demand the skill of Spencerian roundhand.

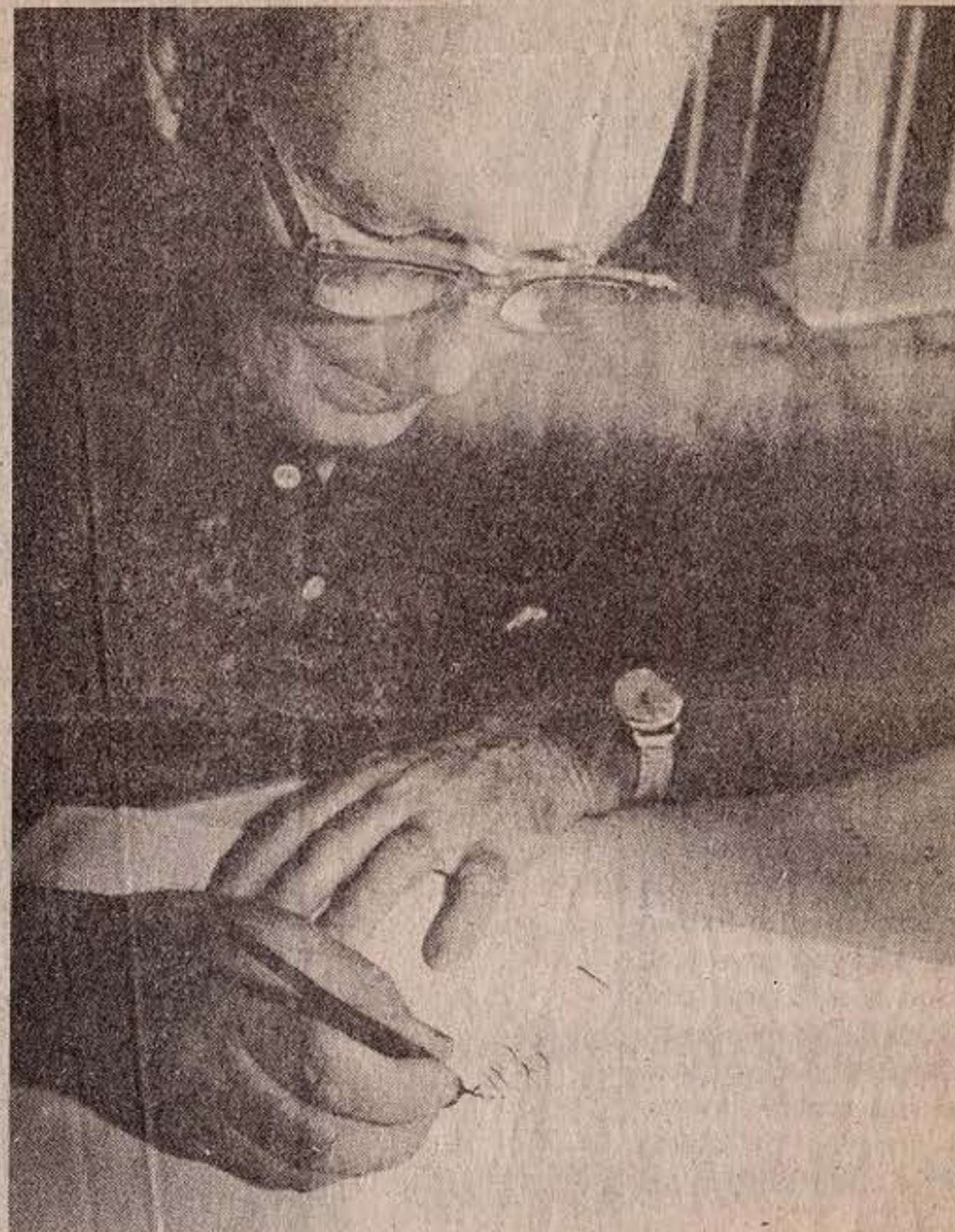
Mr. Scanlon doesn't have a "hands off" relationship with typewriters. As a matter of fact, he uses all five fingers on his left hand when typing. With his right hand, he uses only his index finger. The hand muscles developed after years of oblique pen holding don't take fondly to the typewriter.

Although it is slightly sinister to the lover of fine penmanship, a typewriter is not the most detrimental element of writing.

Mr. Scanlon says the arch villain is the ball point pen. Ball point pens were introduced and handwriting changed.

Because the pen "fought" the hand writing with it, there wasn't a lot of room allowed for creativity, Mr. Scanlon explained. With a ball point pen, pressure is required in order to get the ink flowing on the paper.

The introduction of felt-tipped pens does allow more room for the writer.



Mastering a Spencerian alphabet has been uphill work for Maurice Scanlon. It's taken long hours and lots of practice.