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From the Selected Works of Lynn E. Niedermeier

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G. G. Craig, WKU's Master Penman

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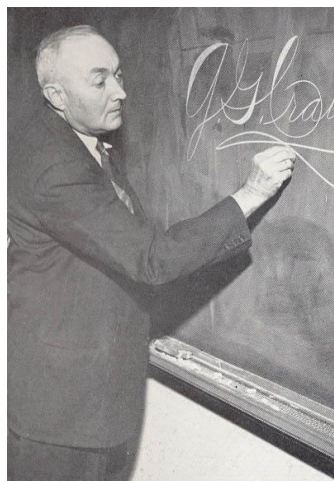
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G. G. Craig, WKU's Master Penman

by Lynn Niedermeier

For decades prior to his death on November 18, 1976, G. G. Craig's mail, delivered to Beech Bend Road, Bowling Green, Kentucky, brought envelopes inscribed with the carefully practiced handwriting of both grade-schoolers and teachers. The sender might write Craig's name and address using one of several styles of penmanship—ornate Spencerian, staid Old English or clean, rounded Palmerian—but the brief form letter enclosed was always a standard examination, intended to show proficiency in the correspondent's rendering of the National Standard Script Alphabet.

The recipient, Gavin Grundy Craig, served as head of the penmanship department at the Western Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College (now WKU) from 1922 to 1965. Born a “leap year baby” on February 29, 1896 in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, Craig received his Bachelor of Secretarial Science degree from the Bowling Green Business University in 1920. He earned a certificate from Ohio's Zanerian College of Penmanship in 1926, a bachelor's degree from the Bowling Green Business University in 1931, and a master's degree from the University of Kentucky in 1935. His master's thesis, *Advanced Handwriting Scale*, was the first study of its kind at that institution.¹ During Craig's long career at WKU he taught, by his own count, penmanship, lettering and engrossing skills to more than 22,800 students.²



In 1950, G. G. Craig demonstrated the immaculate penmanship he had taught since 1922.

Craig was the author of several textbooks on penmanship, and in the 1950s served as president of the International Association of Master Penmen and Teachers of Handwriting. Using his own system, Craig's *Advanced Handwriting Scale*, he offered to evaluate any sample of penmanship using minute criteria such as “form, movement, neatness, alignment, slant, size, quality of line, arrangement, spacing, and relative height of parts and crossings of letters.” Correspondents who received a passing grade became eligible, upon payment of fifty cents, for a hand-colored, engrossed certificate appropriate to their level of accomplishment—Junior, High School, Business School, Advanced, or Teachers. To reach the summit of achievement—the Professional Penmanship Certificate—required no less than completion of all 135 lessons in Craig's writing course manual.³

Craig subscribed to the commonly held view that good handwriting reflected personal discipline and strength of character. Rightly or wrongly, he insisted, “we are judged” by our penmanship.⁴ He departed, however, from the popular theory that children should learn how to print before being taught script. With proper instruction

¹ Joe Creason, “Handwriting, First Grade,” (Louisville, Ky.) *Courier-Journal Magazine*, 13 May 1956, 9-10.

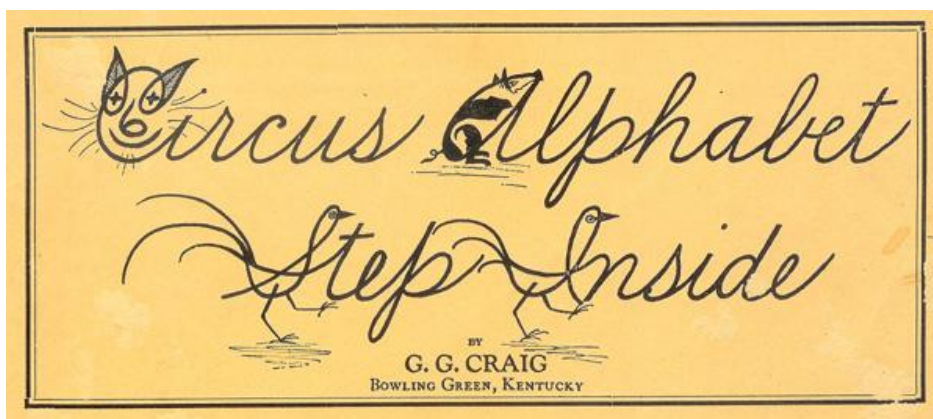
² “80-year-old celebrates 19th birthday,” (Bowling Green, Ky.) *Park City Daily News*, 29 February 1976.

³ G. G. Craig, *Craig's Circus Alphabet* (Bowling Green, Ky.: G. G. Craig, 1932), 4, 14.

⁴ G. G. Craig, *Owl-phabet's Circus*, (Bowling Green, Ky.: G. G. Craig, 1952), inside cover.

emphasizing rhythmic movement and arm motion, Craig believed, even first-graders could write proper longhand. Craig himself was a study in the benefits of rigorous training and practice: whether written at age 29 or 65, his letters remained identical in their neat and legible script.⁵

Nevertheless, this apparently fastidious man possessed a whimsical side. Craig advertised his penmanship course and certificates in a little booklet called *Craig's Circus Alphabet*, published in 1932 and followed, in 1946 and 1952, by two editions of a similarly themed publication, *Owl-phabet's Circus*. The booklets featured each letter of the alphabet embellished in steps to resemble an animal; thus, with a few flourishes of the pen, an "a" became a squirrel, an "e" an owl, a "j" a pigeon and an "x" a horse and rider. Perhaps mindful of the drearier aspects of handwriting instruction in schools, Craig promised teachers that his Circus Alphabet would motivate pupils to improve their penmanship. To a man like this, for whom immaculate writing had become second nature, it was simple to discern in the letters of the alphabet the curve of a bird's wing, the bend of a horse's neck, or the loop of a snake's coils. "The process is easy," he declared—"simply make the letter and dress it up."⁶



⁵ See Craig's letters to WKU presidents Henry Hardin Cherry, 6 July 1925, and Kelly Thompson, 27 September 1961, Henry Hardin Cherry Papers, Box 9, Folder 2 and Kelly Thompson Papers, Box 17, Folder 22, University Archives, WKU.

⁶ *Craig's Circus Alphabet*, 2.