

Saluting John Gregg

In the speech introduction, I established that I had taken business courses during my last two years of high school, graduated from a two-year executive secretarial program at Becker College in Worcester, Massachusetts, and enjoyed two decades of work as an executive secretary before transitioning into the public relations profession. The imagined audience is Becker alumni and their guests during a reunion event.

“What’s a steno pad?” a younger department colleague asked me recently. This led me into providing a description of shorthand, with which this young man was even less familiar. Taking and transcribing shorthand was one of our most valuable office skills. At Becker, we concentrated on our technique and never looked at the man behind the method. I’d like to take a few minutes this morning to focus on five qualities that contributed to the success of the work of John Gregg in producing the shorthand we learned and many of us still use, because they’re important qualities for all of us to have.

- **He was self-motivated.**
- **He pushed for increased speed and accuracy.**
- **He recognized the value of a shorthand system to the role of the secretary.**
- **He loved passing on what he learned.**
- **He stayed engaged late in life.**

Gregg was self-motivated.

John Gregg was born in Ireland 99 years before we graduated from Becker. The youngest of five children, expectations were high, especially because two of his siblings were considered brilliant.

On Gregg’s second day of school, his teacher cracked his head together with another student because she was annoyed by their whispering. This unreported injury left him with a hearing impairment that led to difficulties throughout his only six years of formal education, and Gregg was considered slow-witted. Gregg left school to help support his family.

A journalist using the Pitman Shorthand System visited the Greggs when John was 10. All of the children were expected to learn this system except John. The Pitman System was difficult to master, so one by one the Gregg children abandoned it, except John, who was fascinated by the concept of a shorthand system and who mastered the system and excelled.

After the family moved to Glasgow the next year, Gregg’s light duties as an office boy in a lawyer’s office gave him the time and resources to read books about shorthand writers and learn their systems. During this period, secretaries did not use shorthand. It was a time-saving measure used by intellectuals, lawyers, preachers, politicians, and authors.

Shorthand associations gave members opportunities to debate the artistry and science of shorthand—and the pursuit of an ideal system that was simple and unburdened by an overabundance of symbols.

Motivated to educate himself despite the low expectations of others, by the age of 19 John Gregg had earned a reputation as a shorthand expert; and he was offered his first teaching position. Gregg stayed self-motivated. It would be 20 more years of unrelenting effort before Gregg Shorthand would be widely used, but he never gave up.

Many of us have experienced challenges to our educational goals. Some of you are the first in your families to graduate from college. In my family of five children, only the oldest and youngest earned college degrees. Whatever barriers we faced in the 1960s, we overcame them and motivated ourselves to attend Becker to further our education and increase our business skills.

Gregg pushed for increased speed and accuracy.

It was the desire to increase speed and accuracy that caused Gregg to develop his own system. He published 500 copies of *Light-Line Phonetic Hand-Writing* in 1888 with money borrowed from his brother. The Gregg system was based on longhand writing, with connected vowels, an improvement over The Pitman system that used shading to differentiate meanings.

Gregg faced the difficulty of communicating about his new system to the general public, but word-of-mouth endorsement by his students helped. They easily and quickly reached a speed of 100 words a minute. When shorthand users discovered Gregg's system, most acknowledged that he'd solved problems that had preoccupied shorthand users of shorthand for 300 years.

Speed and accuracy were the by-words of our shorthand classes. When we reached 120 words a minute, we knew we had accomplished something significant.

Gregg recognized the value of a shorthand system to the role of the secretary.

In 1893, Gregg immigrated to the United States with \$230 in his pocket. After two years just barely eking out a living in Boston by operating a tiny school teaching shorthand, he relocated in Chicago. He was the right man, with the right expertise, at just the right time. Chicago was experiencing a boom in commerce and industry, and shorthand skills were in demand.

As secretarial students 40 years ago and then professional secretaries, we, too, appreciated the value of shorthand. Many of us still use shorthand, and some of us have found that it has helped us take advantage of new career opportunities.

Gregg loved passing on what he learned.

His success in opening one school, which ultimately grew to several schools, began when he offered free lessons to public school teachers of business classes, showing them how easy the system was to learn. By 1896, dozens of American public schools were teaching Gregg Shorthand. Gregg's magazine reported stories of students of the Gregg system winning shorthand competitions, and soon he formed the Gregg Publishing Company to publish shorthand textbooks.

As Gregg's influence expanded, his speaking opportunities increased; and he often addressed important gatherings of business teachers. He married a teacher and journalist, who helped him with his work.

It seems to me that there is little in the way of comprehensive secretarial training offered today. Administrative support roles are filled by people with technical skills, who often don't possess the full range of office skills that you and I learned. I think it's important for us to pass on what we've learned, especially because many of us will be retiring within the next few years.

Speaking of retirement, Gregg stayed engaged late in life.

Gregg traveled extensively in Great Britain to promote his shorthand system. While in that country Gregg Shorthand never reached the popularity it had in America, it was wildly popular in France, Germany, Poland, Spain, and especially in Latin America, where for years Latin Americans celebrated Gregg's birthday as a national holiday! This international popularity was due in large part because the Gregg system records the sound of the speaker, and not the English spelling.

Gregg was just about our age during this period; and, when his wife died, he returned home, devoted himself to charitable work, and continued to refine the Gregg Shorthand System. Two years after the death of his first wife, he remarried and, for the first time, became a father.

During the last 20 years of his life, Gregg wrote the history of shorthand, continued publishing his magazine, updated his own textbooks, and published works by other Gregg shorthand experts. In 1947, the year before he died, the king of Great Britain awarded him a medal for his volunteer work during World War II.

Like Gregg, meaningful work and using our skills to benefit others will help keep us youthful. This is important to the organizations we serve, but it's also important to our own sense of purpose and well being.

In closing, it's been my pleasure to tell you just a bit about John Gregg, the father of Gregg Shorthand. For those of you guests who are unfamiliar with Gregg Shorthand, my old shorthand textbooks are on the registration table, with a more recent Gregg dictionary. Take a look!

You'll be seeing me throughout the weekend. Please tell me your stories, especially about how you've used shorthand since we've graduated. I'm working on an article about this topic. You'll see me taking notes on a steno pad, and you won't be surprised to learn that I'm using Gregg Shorthand!