

Reminiscences

of

George N. Hillman

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Foreword

by

Douglas A. Hedin

Editor, MLHP

In August 1926, George Hillman spoke to the annual conference of the National Shorthand Reporters Association on his life as a court reporter in Minnesota. He then had his talk printed as a pamphlet titled "Reminiscences" which he gave to friends, including Kenneth G. Brill, a St. Paul lawyer, who donated his inscribed copy to the Minnesota Historical Society. *

Unlike the authors of many "Reminiscences," Hillman is not nostalgic. He delights in recounting the encouragement he received from the family's pastor to become a court reporter. In 1874, at age twenty-one, he became the official court reporter in Minneapolis, and the following year was appointed the official reporter for courts in Ramsey County. He lists fellow reporters, many of whom were relatives, and notes that many died from "lung diseases" (a euphemism for tuberculosis). He concluded with unusual advice that may have interested, surprised or amused his audience: all court reporters should practice certain breathing exercises or "calisthenics" before going to bed at night.

"Reminiscences" is posted here. It has been reformatted but the author's spelling and punctuation are not changed.

* In December 1927, Hillman addressed the Ramsey County Bar Association on "Some Judges and Lawyers I Have Known." Again, he had that talk reprinted in an elegant pamphlet which he gave to local lawyers. It is posted elsewhere on the MLHP.

Reminiscences



REMINISCENCES

Address by

GEORGE N. HILLMAN
at the Annual Meeting of the
National Shorthand Reporters
Association

PHILADELPHIA

AUGUST, 1926





Compliments of
Geo. N. Hillman

To my Friend
Mr. Kenneth S. Price



OME sixty-odd years ago, when about thirteen, my imagination was stirred by the story that a minister wrote in shorthand on his finger nails the headings of his discourses. About this time my brother Silas, some seven years my senior, was studying Benn Pitman's Manual of Phonography and taking shorthand notes of sermons Sunday after Sunday in the little white Methodist meeting house in the village of Greenwich, two miles from our country home near Centre Falls, Washington County, N.Y.

This brother I dearly loved and highly respected in spite of the few memorable switchings he gave me. There were five boys in our family and the unwritten law was that the older brother should assume the role of monitor to the younger. At this time my eldest brother, John, was studying for the ministry at Concord, N. H., hence Silas was now my "boss."

Silas took prizes in Sunday school for memorizing Scripture verses and was poetical. He carried a small memorandum book and pencil into the fields when plowing, and often, while the horses were resting, sat on the plow-handles noting in this little book his rhyming meditations.

He advised me to take up the study of Graham's Hand Book of Standard Phonography, First and Second Readers, Dictionary, Visitor, etc. I started, but as there was plenty of work on the farm during the summer and school work in the winter, I did not get very much beyond the rudiments for a couple of years. Then I began following the example of Silas at taking notes of sermons. As I sat in the choir loft at church of a Sunday morning, I took notes and spent the afternoon at home transcribing in a book kept for the purpose *as much of them as I could read.*

I then had no notion of becoming a professional shorthand reporter but indulged in this pastime to minimize the somewhat arduous ex-

periences of a farmer boy's life. However, one day the Methodist minister made a pastoral visit at our home, and shortly after dinner, while I was waiting for my plow-horses to finish their oats, my mother said to me, "The minister wants to speak to you." I well remember his tall, gaunt figure and bushy eye-brows — he was homelier than Abraham Lincoln. I was rather shy of ministers in those days, fearing they would ask me some personal questions, such as "Are you a Christian?" or "How is your soul?" but when I entered the parlor I found the man of God sitting with my sermon memorandum book in his hands. That is more than a half century ago but his words I still remember: "Georgie, 'I have been reading your writing in this book and I am surprised, for I see you have here nearly a verbatim report of my sermons." Then he added this memorable exhortation, "Georgie, go into this with all the vim there is in you—you'll make \$5,000 a year." Those words have helped me more in overcoming apparently unsurmountable obstacles in the attainment of verbatim speed than any other discourse to which I have ever listened.

When eighteen, I taught one winter term of district school, shortly afterward attended school at Ft. Edward Institute, and then decided to enter the profession of shorthand reporting, with ambition for congressional work. After two more terms of school teaching and one year's service as official court reporter of Washington county, N. Y., in February, 1874, I came to Minnesota and became the first official reporter of the district and common pleas courts at Minneapolis—then a city of 33,000 population, with two judges—now eleven. On March 1, 1875, I was appointed official reporter, of the district and common pleas courts at St. Paul—then a city of a few hundred more than 33,000, with three judges—now eight. The common pleas court was afterward merged in the district court.

At that time there was no street railway in Minneapolis, but St. Paul enjoyed the facilities of about a third of a mile of single track. The Twin Cities now have a population of more than half a million, four

double-track electric lines, half a dozen railroad lines and several through-paved streets, with respective courthouses but ten miles apart, the one in St. Paul costing a million and the one in Minneapolis four millions—both too small for present day requirements.

There were then two old courthouses in St. Paul, but as there was no suitable space in either for the court reporter, I officed with the then Governor Cushman K. Davis, a prominent lawyer. I found him writing pleadings and briefs with goosequill pens. He was quick to appreciate the value of shorthand, and many dictations he gave me at his home evenings, and several of his important political speeches I reported. He afterward served nearly twelve years in the United States Senate.

As the work of the district court increased, when necessary, additional judges were appointed or elected and I was given legislative increases in salary for myself and the assistant reporters whom I selected, all of whom used the "Standard" system of shorthand, enabling each to read the notes of the others. This unique system was in vogue for more than forty-five years and my position now is that of chief reporter.

My brother Silas preceded me in Minnesota, taught district school in Olmstead county, and during one term the present Secretary of State, Hon. Frank B. Kellogg, was one of his pupils. I remember this brother as the best teacher I ever had. He served as enrolling clerk in the house of representatives in 1874, secured the enactment of the first general court reporters' law in Minnesota, was part owner of a newspaper at Rochester, and for twelve years was official reporter for one of the judges in the district court at Minneapolis. He also assisted me from time to time in the district court at St. Paul. He died at the age of sixty, much beloved by all who knew him.

My brother John used shorthand in his sermonizing and correspondence.

My brother Samuel, two years my junior, was official reporter, of the district, court of the first judicial district of Minnesota for two years and died at the age of twenty-eight.

My brother William has been one of the official reporters in the district court at St. Paul for the past forty years, a daily associate.

My son George B. has served as court reporter in this district for the past thirty-two years. He is president of the Minnesota Shorthand Reporters' Association, now serving his third term.

My daughter Minne is a skilled shorthand writer, takes most of my dictations and makes transcripts which I prefer to those of the dictaphone.

The late lamented Robert S. Taylor, chairman of the Standardization Committee of the N. S. R. A., official reporter of the Standard Oil case and other important litigations, was for eighteen years associated with me as reporter in the district court of Ramsey county, Minnesota. His character and ability require no eulogy from me.

William M. Higgins, for a score of years last past official reporter in the district court at Minneapolis—one of the best shorthand reporters I have ever known—was for twelve years associated with me as reporter in the district court at St. Paul.

William C. Ward and Clifford H. Ward, for a dozen years last past official reporters at Minneapolis, were for several years associated with me in the district court at St. Paul.

My wife — whom I have known from the A-B-C class, and whom I taught shorthand before our marriage — the mother of three girls

and three boys, has been of much value in my professional career, for before the use of the typewriting machine she took many of my dictations in longhand and often gave me speed-dictation readings. For fifty-four years we have lived happily together, and now our chief diversions are reading, listening to the radio and motoring.

During the past fifty-two years of court reporting in Minnesota, in addition to routine work I have reported two impeachment trials, covering thousands of pages of printed matter; a railroad rate case, lasting a couple of years and containing thousands of folios. Much of this experience involved the hardest kind of hard work. While there is now little hair on the top of my head, I find I am still able to write shorthand which others familiar with Standard Phonography can read, my sight and hearing are good, I have no bodily aches or pains and I feel physically fit.

During this period many wonderful discoveries and marvelous advances have been made along numerous lines of human endeavor, notably that of Alexander Graham Bell, whose first telephone I saw on exhibition at the Philadelphia centennial in 1876 — then regarded as a mere toy but now an absolute necessity of commercial and social life. Medicine and surgery have marvelously advanced and twenty years have been added to the average life of man. I distinctly remember, when a boy, seeing my seventeen-year-old sister bled by a doctor for inflammation of the lungs — a treatment which today would be regarded [as] malpractice. Numerous diseases are now curable that then were believed incurable. The competent physician may now with reasonable certainty prevent or cure the dreaded smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid and yellow fevers, cholera, pneumonia, hydrophobia, lockjaw, tuberculosis. Similar progress has been made in photography, finance, education, transportation, etc. The typewriter and dictaphone have immensely lightened the labors of our profession.

The shorthand court reporter occupies a responsible and honorable position. Usually, as regards the facts of a case, he is "the court of last resort." What the *modus operandi* of court reporting may ultimately be we can hardly imagine. All familiar with the facts realize that it is a strenuous business. Possibly the principle of the radio—which I regard the greatest discovery of all time—may be so applied that a proper record may be obtained.

When I think of the score of my junior professional brethren in Minnesota who during the past forty years have passed on, most of them because of lung diseases, I am quite of the opinion that my own escape has been largely due to the fact that, some forty years ago, I *learned how to breathe*—an exercise which every professional shorthand writer should know and practice. The principal action should be below the diaphragm, not above—so frequently the case with persons of sedentary habit. Inflate the lungs, then slowly let out the breath as in noiseless whistling. A few minutes' practice daily safely expands the lungs and enables one to read and speak without shortness of breath. A short exercise in callisthenics before retiring is salutary and induces sleep. Inhaling camphor fumes quickly relieves colds in the head and lungs. Deep breathing, proper exercise, such as walking, care of the teeth and freedom from colds tend to longevity.

I give this sketch in the hope that it may be of service to others "who follow in our train." ■

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The following self-sketch is from the Fourth Volume of *Theodore Christianson's Minnesota: The Land of Sky-Tinted Waters* (1935).

GEORGE N. HILLMAN came to Minnesota sixty years ago and it was his great distinction and honor to give more than a half a century to the important profession of

court reporting. It was a work and profession which made him especially well known, of course, among lawyers and court officials. His was a career of duty gladly performed, a life of service by which he merited and received the respect and esteem of his fellow men.

Mr. Hillman was born near Center Falls, Washington County, New York, July 14, 1852, and he represents an American family that was established in early Colonial times, on the shores of New England. His ancestor, John Hillman, was an Englishman. The tradition is that he was stolen or impressed from a fishing boat on the River Thames, was carried across the ocean to America, and made his escape and settled permanently on the Island of Martha's Vineyard off the Massachusetts coast. This occurred in the later years of the seventeenth century. There have Hillmans in New England for over two centuries who claimed descent from him. George Washington Hillman was born in Washington County, New York, and his wife was a native of Saratoga County in the same state.

George N. Hillman acquired a liberal academic education. He was one of few comparatively young men at that time who decided upon mastering shorthand as a means toward a business or professional career. He had been a proficient shorthand writer for years before the typewriting machine was invented, and his notes were for years transcribed in longhand. He was a shorthand reporter when there was comparatively limited competition in that field.

Mr. Hillman came West in 1874. His first year in Minnesota was spent at Minneapolis, where he was appointed the first court reporter of the district court under a general law providing for such service. In 1875 he removed to St. Paul, which has been his home ever since. Here Judges Westcott Wilkin, Hascal Brill and Orlando Simons appointed him court reporter for the district court, and by repeated reappointments he gave a continuous service in that capacity until his retirement on September 1, 1929.

The hundreds of lawyers and laymen who learned to appreciate the fidelity and the competence of his work during these years had fully subscribed to the tribute paid him when he retired by his fellow reporters, who presented him a loving cup, accompanied by a handsome scroll. This scroll states that it was bestowed upon Mr. George N. Hillman, "Dean of the Minnesota Reporters by his reporting friends, on the completion of fifty years continuous service. Recognizing the ability and accuracy required of shorthand reporters, and desiring to show appreciation of the skill demonstrated for half a century by one who has encountered and overcome all difficulties and one who is regarded as a leader in verbatim reporting, the undersigned officials and shorthand reporters of the State of Minnesota present this loving cup to our friend and associate as a tribute to his worth and high place in the ranks of the shorthand profession."

Mr. Hillman as a matter of routine duty reported many famous trials in Minnesota courts, including the impeachment trials of Judges Sherman Page and E. St.

Julien Cox. He also reported a number of historical events. One of these was the occasion of the driving of the golden spike, celebrating the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad at Gold Creek, Montana, September 8, 1883. The Northern Pacific officials selected him for this purpose. He accompanied the president, Henry Villard, in his special train, and the many other distinguished guests, including General Grant, William M. Evarts, Frederick Billings, Henry M. Teller, and a group of foreign diplomats and stockholders of the road. This ceremony, marking the completion of one of the great transcontinental railroads, was recalled by the recent publication in 1932 of a little thirty-two page book entitled *Driving the Golden Spike, Story of a Great Achievement*, of which Mr. Hillman is the author. Another small book written and published by Mr. Hillman, replete with illuminating sidelights on the legal profession, was entitled *Some Judges and Lawyers I Have Known*, and since his retirement he has written *Wheel of Fortune, Recollections of a Shorthand Reporter*, containing more than 200 pages. Here Mr. Hillman has had opportunity to express himself more fully in recounting numerous great trials and historic events within the realm of his experience. He has drawn heavily upon his own shorthand notes and also his unfailing memory in giving the vivid pictures of events that have gone into Minnesota history during the sixty years of his life and experience in the state.

Mr. Hillman since early youth has been a member of the Methodist Church. He is a Republican, though never an active participant in practical politics. His successful

professional career has been matched by a very happy home life. He married July 4, 1872, Mary E. Cutter of Washington County, New York. She had been a student of shorthand under him. Their three children are: Homer C., Minnie A. and Mrs. Edna Hillman Roney. Mr. and Mrs. Hillman have occupied a home at 615 Lincoln Avenue for fifty-five years.



Related Articles

George N. Hillman, "Some Judges and Lawyers I Have Known."
(MLHP, 2016) (Published first, 1927).

Jackie Young, "A History of Court Reporting in Minnesota."
(MLHP, 2014).

"William O. Hillman (1859-1932)" (MLHP, 2016).

"Robert S. Taylor (1868-1924)." (MLHP, 2016).



Posted MLHP: November 12, 2016;

Biographical sketch from Christianson's *History* added May 9, 2021.