

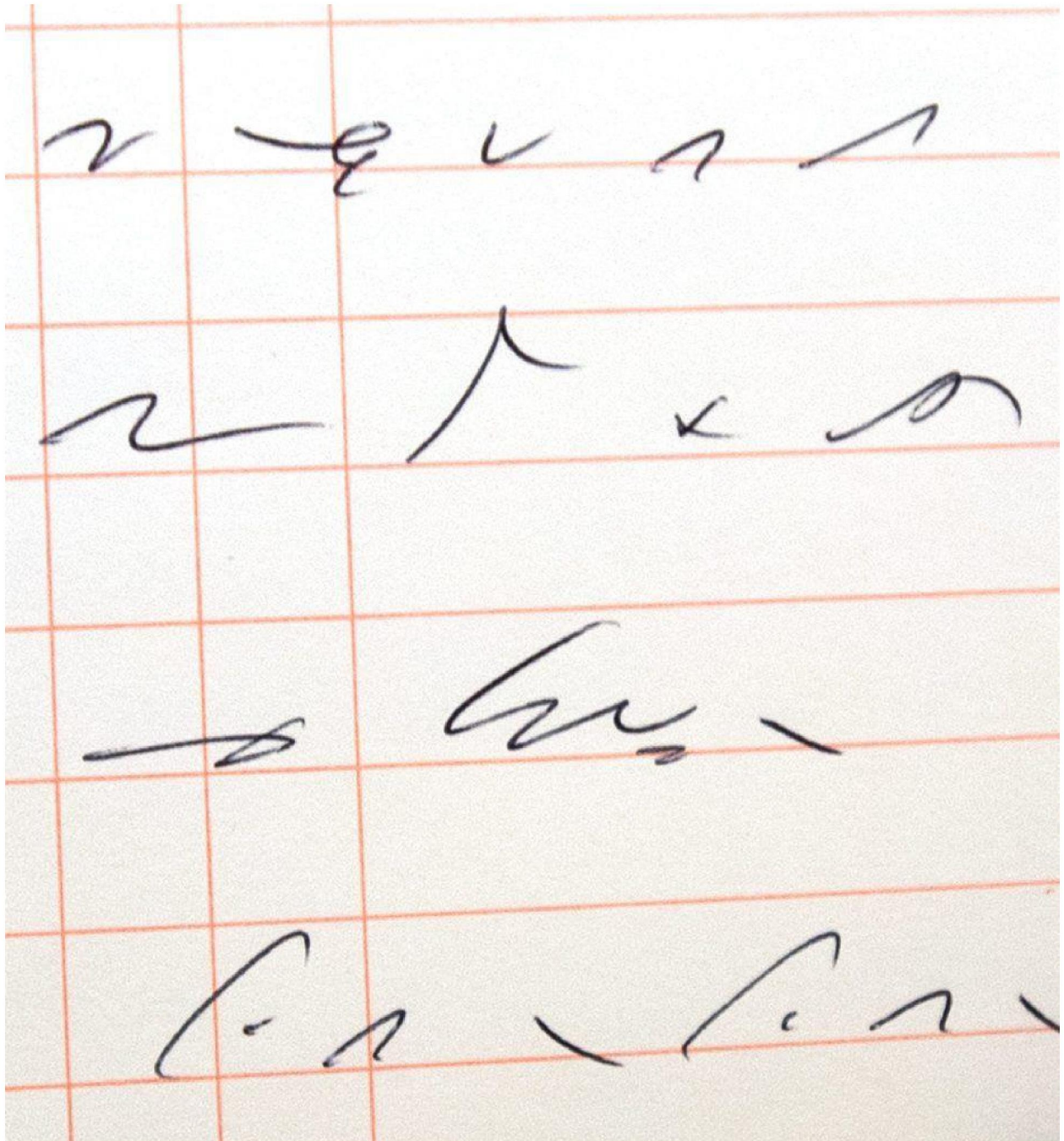
After more than 50 years, Douglas County court reporter putting shorthand pen away

- Mary Schenk, News Gazette



Douglas County court reporter Nellie Gilpin, 84, the last pen-and-paper court stenographer in the state, is shown Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, in the courtroom she has worked in for 50 years at the Douglas County Courthouse in Tuscola. Gilpin is set to retire by month's end.

- Robin Scholz



An example of the shorthand of Douglas County court reporter Nellie Gilpin, who is set to retire after more than 50 years at the courthouse.

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TUSCOLA — If folks around Tuscola feel the earth shaking in the not-too-distant future, it could be because Nellie Gilpin is leaving the Douglas County Courthouse.

The official court reporter to four different circuit judges and numerous associates for more than five decades is putting away her pen, paper and typewriter to head off into the sunset — or more accurately, to Sun City, Ariz., with husband Bob.

That's correct. No court-reporting machine or computer for this dynamo.

For her entire career as a court stenographer, she has written the verbatim record of court proceedings on a pad of paper with an ink pen, using an artful system of elliptical figures and lines known as Gregg shorthand.

Gilpin learned shorthand in high school and after graduating, took a job with a lawyer. She took a break from working when she and Bob started their family. When their two sons started school, she agreed to try her hand at court reporting.

“I didn't go to college. This has been my education,” she said.

Will she miss it?

“I don't think so,” said Gilpin, who turns 85 later this month.

Yes, that's also correct.

Since December 1968, the 84-year-old wife and mother whose 61- and 57-year-old sons have urged her to retire so they can too, guilt-free, has been coming from Newman to work in the stately old courthouse in Tuscola.

And for many years, people have asked her when she was going to retire. The neatly coiffed, dressed-to-the-nines professional always gave a polite response.

But it was obvious she liked the work, or most of it.

“I've enjoyed it. I really have enjoyed it,” Gilpin said. “There's not any nicer people to work with than these judges and attorneys.”

Her judge bosses were, in order: the late Jim Sherrick, Frank Lincoln, Mike Carroll and now Rick Broch.

Although she informed the Illinois director of court reporting services and Broch that she was retiring Jan. 1, she's still reporting for reporting. That's because there is a drastic shortage of court reporters in Illinois.

"I told Judge (Broch) I would come and work for him, but I didn't want to work for anyone else," she said. "My license is good for a couple more years."

Gilpin said it feels good to be relieved of the burden of transcripts, which she often hammered out at the dining-room table at home well into the wee hours of the morning "because I didn't have time during the day."

"I just finished my last one (last) weekend," she said. "It's a good feeling when you get something done like that. It was just about 100 pages."

Unlike her younger colleagues who use software that can translate the bizarre-looking, machine-generated characters into English, Gilpin looks at her shorthand in her notebook and types the words out on a typewriter. She doesn't use a computer for word processing.

And unlike many longtime court reporters who suffer from neck and back pain from hours of minimal movement combined with the strain of intense concentration, Gilpin feels pretty good.

"I've got a crooked finger from writing so much, but that's the extent of it," she said, admitting she occasionally has a hard time hearing a witness.

"I do sometimes because our courtroom is so big. People don't want to speak out because they are afraid. I've got to get it in the record. I'm responsible for that. I've never been shy about it," she said of asking a witness to repeat or speak up if she didn't hear or understand.

Gilpin doesn't know how many words a minute she takes, although she describes the average witness as "talking about 140 mph."

To be certified, a court reporter must be able to record 225 words per minute, and most people talk much faster, said veteran Champaign County court-reporter supervisor Melissa Clagg.

That Gilpin is getting that many words down with a pen on paper is nothing short of remarkable.

“I just type them from my notes into the typewriter, and once I get them finished, I just put them in the Xerox machine,” she said. “Wasn’t that awful when we had to use carbon paper?”

Gilpin said she never really considered learning shorthand on a machine.

“It would have been clear down in Shelbyville and we live in Newman,” she said of the 66-mile trek to the nearest school that offered those courses.

When she does make her final exit, it will be the end of an era, as Gilpin is the last pen-on-paper official court reporter in Illinois.

“I don’t know how come I stayed so long, but I did. (Co-worker) Becky (Lucas) said it’s because we had a good time. It’s been a great time for me,” Gilpin said.

While she and Bob enjoy going to the movies, playing miniature golf and hanging out with fun neighbors in Sun City, she’s not sure what else might be on the agenda.

“We will go there for a few weeks, then I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve never been retired before.”

State finding court reporters in short supply

Although Nellie Gilpin wanted to leave her job as Douglas County’s official court reporter on Jan. 1, she has stayed on because she has no replacement.

Tammy Bumgarner, director of court reporting services for the state of Illinois, said she and other court reporters who are also nearing retirement are doing their best to whip up enthusiasm

for the profession, which they maintain is not about to be made defunct by technology any time soon.

Starting salaries range from \$41,000 to \$51,000 a year with benefits, but there is additional income from preparing transcripts.

The state currently employs about 525 licensed court reporters. As of May 2019, Bumgarner said there were 1,766 active certified shorthand reporter licenses in Illinois.

"I don't see it resolving itself any time soon because people have to go through school," Bumgarner said.

Late last summer, court reporters around the state launched a series of introductory classes to people interested in the trade for which a college degree is not required.

People could sign up for four weeks worth of classes taught for free by certified reporters to see if it was worth pursuing. One of the first round of classes was taught in Champaign. There were others in another 10 cities.

Currently, classes are going on in LaSalle and Peoria and more are scheduled for Dixon, Strasburg, Rockford, Edwardsville and again in Champaign.

"Since we started that, we've gotten about 1,000 inquiries and over 20 have started school. But that could take a couple years to see results," Bumgarner said, grateful for the response.

Those teaching the introductory classes try to be frank with attendees.

"You might not make it. If you can never get your speed up to pass the licensing, you can't be a court reporter," she said. "That risk makes it harder to sell someone. We're trying to weed out people on the fence. To make it, they need to be gung ho."

The next "First Steps" classes are scheduled for March 17, 24, and 31 at the Champaign Public Library, from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

For more information, visit illinoisofficialcourtreporters.com.



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