

# His pen has kept track of trials

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**By Rick Romell**

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**West Bend** – They no longer make purple Shaeffer ink, Eversharp pens or court reporters like Coley Griffin.

For some 48 years, Griffin has listened carefully to lawyers and witnesses spit out some 286 million words, and he's recorded every one of them – with a pen.

This is the age of the stenotype machine, soon to be the age of the computer-aided stenotype machine. Only a handful of court reporters remain who practice the craft of Gregg shorthand. When Griffin retires July 5, the handful will be a little smaller.

Griffin, reporter for Washington County Circuit Judge J. Tom Merriam, doesn't drink, smoke, curse or miss work. Nonetheless, he's good company.

"When I started reporting there were no machine writers in Wisconsin – none," said Griffin, 66. "Everybody wrote with a pen in Gregg shorthand, Pitman or some variation of the Pitman."

One of Griffin's early mentors was an elderly Jefferson County court reporter named Francis Grant, who used the dip pen and inkwell of Pitman system writers. When Grant's right hand got tired, he'd take dictation with his left.

Griffin can't do that, but he has tested out as fast as 260 words a minute. That was after he enlisted in the Navy during World War II, where he spent four years on the action side of a notepad.

There were quite a few stenotype writers by then, but the Navy had to call on reporters like Griffin for Mediterranean duty because of a supply problem in the area.

"They ran out of ribbons and ink for their machines," Griffin said.

He was in Oran when he was dragooned into duty on a British ship to report the trial of two Englishmen and an Irishman accused of mutiny.

"Then Irishman had a brogue so thick you could have sliced it with a knife," Griffin said. The other defendants weren't much easier to decipher, but Griffin did, and lived to wrestle again with the Latin legal jargon of Wisconsin courts.

He's reduced Sicilian death threats and countless polysyllabic chemical names to graceful curlicues. His most difficult case was a three-week-long trial over the explosion of the Cedarburg power plant.

"There was 15 minutes of lay testimony," Griffin said. "The rest was all metallurgists, chemists, mechanical and chemical engineers and plant experts."

The witnesses and a fast-talking lawyer with poor diction were tossing around words like oxyacetylene, potassium dichromate and synchronous speed as though they were in a graduate school seminar.

In another trial, Griffin kept on writing as an excited witness demonstrated how he'd been assaulted in a tavern by grabbing and shaking the court reporter.

Griffin's weapons for battles like those have been purple ink (it's easier on the eyes), a fine-point fountain pen (he stocked up on Eversharps several years ago when the brand was discontinued) and a "bible." Not the one by God; the one by Charles Lee Swem – "Gregg Reporting Shorthand Course."