In a Different Voice: Sign Language Preservation and America's Deaf Community

Susan Burch
Gallaudet University

Abstract

Current studies in heritage language learning have explored the linguistic and social-cultural issues of identity. Most scholars, however, overlook an important heritage language group in America: the Deaf community. This work seeks to redress this oversight by examining the ways Deaf people protected their heritage language—American Sign Language—and their cultural identity during the early twentieth century. This period was especially hostile to the Deaf community, exemplified by increasing application of oralism in schools for the Deaf. Oralism, which teaches lip reading and speech instead of Sign Language, promised to integrate Deaf people into mainstream society. Deaf resistance to oralism took on many forms, including the support of Deaf teachers in schools, as well as Deaf churches, clubs, and Deaf newspapers. Individuals and organizations also exploited new technology in an effort to codify and legitimate their language, producing numerous Sign Language films and dictionaries. While solidifying the broad Deaf community, efforts to appear "normal" to mainstream society ultimately marginalized sub-groups within the community, including women and racial minorities.

Current studies in heritage language learning have explored the linguistic and social-cultural issues of identity. Many of these issues are also addressed in the present study of America's Deaf community, a community which is not usually included in discussions about heritage language learners. Nonetheless, Deaf people have long identified themselves as a linguistic minority rather than a disabled community, a position which found academic support in the work of William Stokoe (1960, 1972, 1978) in the 1960s and 1970s. Deaf people, however, differ from other heritage language learners in America because they are not immersed in the heritage culture from birth. The vast majority of Deaf people have hearing parents, siblings, and children.

Roots of a Community: Deaf Schools

A distinctly American Deaf community did not emerge until the early to mid-nineteenth century with the founding of permanent residential schools for the Deaf. The first permanent school, established in 1817, was the American

School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut. French Deaf educator and co-founder of ASD Laurent Clerc established a linguistic and pedagogical precedent of Sign Language-based education for Deaf schools in the next five decades. These schools not only provided Deaf people an isolated and supportive environment—a "place of their own"—but also codified a common Sign Language across the nation (see Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989; see also Gannon, 1981). New "places" for Deaf people sprang from the schools, beginning with alumni associations, churches, and Deaf publications. In 1864 Deaf people gained the opportunity for advanced education with the establishment of Gallaudet College, to date the only liberal arts university exclusively for the Deaf. By the mid-1800s, Deaf cultural self-awareness was established and expanding. At this point, educational specialists fortified a campaign to introduce another methodology into the American schools: oralism.

Oralists, the most fervent of whom taught the exclusive use of speech and lip-reading for communication by and among the Deaf, promised to integrate Deaf people into mainstream society. Attempts to implement oralism in Deaf schools began early in America, the first state-sponsored oral school opening the same year as ASD. Horace Mann and other educators, inspired by a tour to German oral schools, argued the superiority of oralism in the 1840s, but failed to overcome the network and influence of signing educators. The appeal of oralism, however, began to eclipse that of manual communication by the end of the century. In part, oralists benefited from an effective and outspoken advocate, Alexander Graham Bell. Substantial financial backing and public support from Bell and other proponents of oralism fueled a rapid propaganda campaign, as well as constant access to influential politicians. Moreover, oralist promises that Deaf children could speak pulled at the heart strings of parents who wanted to hear their children's voices, who wanted their children to be "normal" like them. Medical specialists particularly appreciated the attempts to utilize residual hearing and establish programs to preserve hearing and eradicate (or cure) Deafness. Moreover, oralism appealed to those involved with the growing progressive spirit of the nation in the 1890s-1900s. Particularly after the recent Civil War and in the midst of a massive influx of immigrants, political and social reformers sought to integrate America's marginalized communities and create cultural cohesion by creating a common spoken language—English. The realization that Deaf people could be educated, as demonstrated by Gallaudet and Clerc's successes, encouraged other educators and interested parties to take the next theoretical step in integrating Deaf people into the mainstream world by teaching them to speak. Thus the first contest for cultural primacy began in the birthplace of Deaf culture: the schools.

The ramifications of oralism were immense for the Deaf. Not only did oralism challenge the validity of sign as a teaching and communication method, but it also curtailed the effectiveness of the education itself as the focus of Deaf education shifted from academic subjects to speech training.

Deaf teachers were displaced as oral teachers—invariably hearing people—filled teaching positions. Strict oralism threatened not only Deaf culture but also Deaf people's economic stability, and a spirited resistance began to protect the privileges established in the earlier part of the century. In spite of ardent protests by Deaf people and their advocates, oralism continued to dominate Deaf education in the early to mid twentieth century. Oralism peaked in popularity in the 1920s even as various factors, including Deaf resistance, were contributing to its slow demise.

Attempts to reach pure oralism failed as Deaf people stubbornly refused to relinquish Sign Language within as well as outside the school walls. The ability of Deaf teachers to influence generations of students remained constant even as hearing men and women dominated the schools. Inside and outside the classroom, Deaf students naturally flocked to Deaf teachers for advice and easy communication. Most residential schools maintained several Deaf teachers on staff, even during 1920s and early 1930s, the height of oral programs. Their presence at schools provided important role models to Deaf children who experienced negative labeling as "failures" by oralists, and the stigma of being "other" in mainstream society. Most testimonials from students describe in passionate terms the inspiration Deaf teachers—much more than hearing instructors—had on them. For example, Grover Farquhar taught for forty-eight years, primarily at the Missouri school. His students frequently cited Farquhar's masterful signing skills, his commitment to students and excellence in educating. As one student wrote,

> I may be biased because I admired him ever since he tried to teach me in the days of knee britches. Then, I voted him the best teacher I ever knew, and after 35 years of trying to emulate him, I am convinced he is still leading the field, with the rest of us trying to accomplish a fraction of his good in a classroom. (Reed, 1971, pp. 9-10)

As role models, Deaf teachers subverted negative images of Deaf people perpetuated by oralists, and offered viable and vibrant alternatives for the students. They also continued to communicate in signs, and often introduced students to the broader Deaf community.

The role of Deaf students in preserving and promoting Sign Language cannot be overlooked. Propaganda from oral associations suggested that generations of Deaf people adopted oralist training and adhered to its social goals. However, closer scrutiny reveals the falsehood of these claims. Consistently, the students rejected oralism, choosing instead to communicate in signs, and identified primarily with their separate, cultural community. Oral advocates frequently complained about the continuing use of Sign Language among Deaf students and the resistance of Deaf people against integrating with hearing society after graduation from schools. At the residential state school for the Deaf in Georgia, for instance, every effort was made to enforce communication in speech only, but "despite these efforts, the pupils insistently

used signs in communicating with each other, a condition which is in every 'combined' school in the world and which deprives the people of the use of speech outside the schoolroom" (Harris, 1925, p. 13). Principal and oralist supporter James Coffey Harris further noted that, "once a signer, the pupil is always a signer" (Harris, 1925, p. 13).

Students like Ernest Marshall, who attended the New York Fanwood School in the 1920s, proved more influential than oral educators. Marshall, who was the third generation of a Deaf family, was especially popular at his school, in part because of his masterful signing skills. He, and others who had already learned the language, taught the other classmates how to communicate more facilely (Bangs, 1987). Likewise, John Burton Hotchkiss, in his own days at ASD, served as a sign role model. Classmate L. C. Tuck claimed that Hotchkiss took him under his wing at ASD, and Tuck sought to emulate this graceful signer (Tuck, 1923, p. 245). Some students even joined forces to combat oralist policies directly. For example, when the New Jersey school reduced their manual programs in 1917, students protested, and appealed to the State Board of Education for help. While denied by the board, these and other efforts attest to the commitment of students to protect the language as well.

In reality, oralism was never widely adopted in its most extreme form. The vast majority of residential schools for the Deaf in the early twentieth century used a combined method (which included signed communication in addition to speech and lip-reading education), and not a pure oralist approach. At various Conferences for the American Instructors of the Deaf (CAID), the premier professional organization, administrators and oralist supporters recognized the prevalence of Sign Language over oral communication, viewing it as the foremost threat to oralism's success. In one lecture, the superintendent of the Utah School, Frank Driggs, produced a barrage of letters from other superintendents explaining why their schools could not produce strong oralist pupils. They complained that:

> The most serious hindrance in the combined method is the fact that almost all the teachers know more or less about the Sign Language [as do] a good many of the officers, and they use it to the crowding out of speech . . . there appear to be two principle hindrances—first, antipathy of the Deaf themselves to all oral work and incidentally to oral teachers; and second, the fact that the little Deaf youngsters when associated with the older Deaf very early master the Sign Language and naturally prefer to use this. (Driggs, 1914, pp. 111-120)

Several administrators considered Deaf employees and students' response to oralism as warlike, and more significantly, triumphant.

A Signing Sanctuary: Religious Services for the Deaf

Chapel services, an established feature in most oral schools and virtually all combined schools, consistently promoted Sign Language and ultimately

provided a bridge between Deaf students and the broader Deaf world. Deaf ministers preached in sign to the students on a weekly basis and offered Bible study classes and other programs also conducted in Sign Language. From a desire to maintain religious observance, the schools required attendance, unintentionally endorsing the use of Sign Language. In addition, this form of religious instruction created a bridge between students and the outside Deaf community by introducing adult Deaf leaders to Deaf school children, and ultimately helped young Deaf people establish a broader network of friends after graduation. While chapel services selectively transmitted cultural values and modes of communication, independent Deaf churches provided a constant and growing place of sanctuary not only for religiously-minded Deaf people but for Sign Language preservation and transmission.

From the establishment of ASD in 1817, which enforced religious participation by its students, religion remained a central feature of the Deaf community. Inspired by the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, reformers and missionaries like Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet established Deaf schools in large part to save Deaf people from the absence of God's word. Gallaudet's family maintained ties to Deaf education and to Deaf ministry, as did Laurent Clerc's progeny. Thomas Gallaudet and Francis Clerc devoted their lives to missionary work among the Deaf. Deaf people, too, rapidly filled lay positions in churches, and ultimately entered the ministry. Many major leaders in the Deaf community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shared a religious background, including Henry Winter Syle, Guilbert Braddock, J. W. Michaels, A. G. Leisman, Olof Hanson, and James Cloud.

In Deaf churches, ministers preached in Sign Language in part because it was pragmatic: Deaf people were incapable of reading lips from distant pews. As one minister claimed on behalf of his fellow clergymen "but to be really comforting and satisfying, as service for the Deaf, not less than for the hearing, must be 'in such a tongue as the people understandeth' and for the Deaf that means the Sign Language" ("Survey Report," 1929, pp. 12-13). Communicating religious thought through Sign Language also was tied to religious dogma itself. Many Deaf ministers claimed that God had given Deaf people the language of signs in order to create a bridge to His kingdom. Daniel Tuttle, Bishop of the Diocese of Missouri, even offered a "Prayer on behalf of the Sign Language" in which he thanked "our Heavenly father for the Sign Language for the Deaf, and for the blessings which the use of it hath brought"("A Prayer for the Sign Language," 1925, p. 3).

In the early nineteenth century, such creationist ideas were popular, but even as society searched for scientific answers to social conditions and physical impairments through the theory of Social Darwinism, and later eugenics, Deaf rhetoric about Sign Language suggested divine roots and spiritual significance. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, J. W. Michaels, for instance, frequently reminded his parishioners that God had created Deaf people

and provided for them "by means of the Sign Language and so the Deaf now hear [see] the Word and the Gospel preached" (see Landes, 1965). A. G. Leisman, another Deaf leader and clergyman, likewise was effusive in his poems and sermons about Sign Language, writing for example, "O master of all languages, we thank Thee for the power and the glory of the Sign Language . . . Thou knowest what is best for the Deaf, and Thou art just" (Leisman, 1947, p. 29).

That signed sermons filled a need for both religious affirmation and accessibility to knowledge no doubt increased the popularity of Deaf churches in the early twentieth century. Deaf publications frequently noted churches hospitable to Sign Language and visitations from Deaf ministers. In contrast, J. W. Jones, superintendent of the Ohio School for the Deaf, noted correctly in 1918 that general attention to religion had declined in mainstream society and that those recruited to teach the Deaf came less frequently from the ministry. Nevertheless, Deaf people's attendance at churches had grown (Jones, 1918, p. 11; Palumbo, 1966, p. 65). The Episcopal church lead missionary work among the Deaf. Inspired by the Gallaudet family's commitment to education and faith, seven Deaf men had entered the Episcopal priesthood by 1900. By 1930, fifteen more had followed (Gannon, 1981, p. 183; see also *NAD Proceedings,* 1904; *The Rustler,* 1906; *The Silent Review,* 1911). Deaf Protestant leaders faced the challenge of cobbling together scattered communities of Deaf people even across state lines. Despite these obstacles, by the 1930s many ministers to the Deaf had established churches—either independent or partnered with mainstream ones—in most northern states and in virtually all major cities (Jones, 1918, p. 24; "Sign Worship," 1936, p. 26). Other denominations quickly expanded their scope to include Deaf outreach programs. At the Philadelphia All Soul's Church, ministers to the Deaf even held a conference on Sign Language ("Sign Worship," 1936, p. 26).

The Catholic Church maintained strong ties to the community in other ways. Beginning as early as 1837, Catholic priests and nuns opened a school for Deaf children, and *The Catholic Deaf Mute*, which began publication in 1899, became a major advocate for Deaf rights as well as Deaf religious education. By the 1930s, clergymen claimed 25,000 Deaf members, and boasted that 90 priests were preparing to join with 47 more to preach in Sign Language. In New York and New Jersey, Rev. Stephen Landherr taught priests Sign Language. Beginning in 1937 every student at the Newark Diocese was trained in signs ("Priests Advocate Sign Language," 1937; "Sign Worship," 1936).

Jewish Deaf people faced discrimination within both mainstream society and their own faith; for example, the belief that lack of hearing barred Deaf people from knowledge led to restrictions on their participation in religious rituals in order to protect them from breaking laws or overburdening them. By the early 1900s associations for Jewish Deaf began to increase as well. In 1907 Marcus Kenner founded the Hebrew Congregation of the Deaf, later known as the New York Society of the Deaf. By 1911 this organization had joined

with hearing organizations to form the Society for the Welfare of the Jewish Deaf, which also served the new immigrant community and established hobby clubs, employment services, and sporting events (Berg, 1984, p. 39; Van Cleve, 1987, p. 427). Jewish Deaf societies prospered mainly in New York and Philadelphia with the help of private organizations, and enjoyed close ties to the New York School for the Deaf, Fanwood (Berg, 1984, p. 38; Rowell, 1937, pp. 38-41). The newspaper of the association, the *Jewish Deaf*, was one of the most forceful and articulate independent Deaf periodicals, and published editorials from Deaf leaders around the nation. Rabbi Felix Nash, a hearing graduate from the Chicago School of Social Work, worked with Marcus Kenner and led the congregations in New York until his early death in 1932. Nash learned Sign Language in order to work with the Deaf community and became a fervent crusader for Sign Language use in Deaf schools, securing employment for the Deaf, and numerous other rights for Deaf people. Dr. Barnett Elzas also ministered to the Jewish Deaf in New York, learning Sign Language and expanding the scope of the local outreach programs. He and other rabbis altered sermons so that they faced the congregation at all times. Jewish Deaf societies also offered sign classes to their members (Elzas, 1912).

Deaf religious organizations commanded attention at conferences and in Deaf periodicals, and provided a source of considerable cultural pride for Deaf people. Services affirmed Deaf people's spiritual equality with hearing peers and emphasized the uniqueness of sign communication within this sacred realm. Consistently, national and local Deaf clubs opened important meetings with prayers and recitations delivered by Deaf ministers. Major Deaf periodicals, like the *Silent Worker*, *Deaf-Mute's Journal*, and *Modern Silents*, as well as publications from state schools for the Deaf (also known as the *Little Paper Family* or *LPF*) informed their readers of upcoming events and sermons at local Deaf churches, or the visits of popular Deaf ministers (see Draper, 1914).

Addressing the Deaf in a public venue like a church demanded a masterful command of Sign Language. For this reason, the clergy had ties to many master signers and teachers. The signing ability of ministers aided the preservation of Sign Language in the twentieth century, for most ministers to the Deaf had ample access to preach at state schools for the Deaf; the message was essential to the religious education and the medium unified the culture. Deaf ministers shared with school teachers and administrators a desire to combat immorality and instill a strong sense of Christian duty among school-age children. In addition, Deaf ministers, by their very example, also promoted a culture-specific model for the students. As members of the well-educated, worldly, middle-class Deaf elite, enjoying national networks and opportunities and prestige, Deaf ministers enlarged young Deaf students' sphere of reference and helped them to recognize their own potential. Moreover, ministers to the Deaf were respected members of a community that preferred the company of other Deaf people.

Of equal importance to the development of Deaf culture was the bridge Deaf churches created between communities and ideas. It is clear from remarks made by leaders and followers that the spiritual elite used their pulpits to link religious values with Deaf political issues (see Hasenstab, 1904; Merril, 1938). Many Deaf ministers and supportive hearing ones had leading roles in both major social and political organizations, including the NAD and the Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD). They also influenced individual schools for the Deaf as teachers and administrators, as the story of Olof Hanson shows. Hanson, a bulwark of the NAD and an outspoken Deaf activist, formally joined the clergy in his later life. In reports for Deaf religious associations and in other public arenas, Hanson communicated the common attitude among his peers that, "We can not speak too strongly in favor of the Sign Language. All the Deaf, including those taught orally, should have an opportunity to learn it while young and at school" ("Survey Report," 1929, pp. 13-14).[1] In the 1920s and 1930s, J. Schuyler Long, also a minister, was principal of the Iowa School for the Deaf, and he personally trained hearing teachers of the Deaf in Sign Language.

In part, the ministry's interest in secular issues affecting Deaf peoples' lives stemmed from the missionary spirit. Churches and temples offered their communities more than the chance to gather together in a sanctioned environment; various religious institutions organized clubs for the Deaf and Sunday picnics, as well as literacy programs, and welfare support. For Deaf people in the early twentieth century—before the advent of telecommunication devices (TTY), and other efficient means of communication—Deaf church-based events offered a constant link to the broader community. As schools faced the challenge of oralist policies, Deaf churches gained greater influence by promoting cohesion within the community.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Deaf churches and signed sermons provided a safe haven from oralism's influence. Even those who supported pure oral education in schools acknowledged that in spiritual matters, Sign Language provided a more accessible means to the heart, and some seminaries began including Sign Language training for potential missionaries among the Deaf (see Landes, 1965). The rise of Deaf religious organizations, like their secular counterparts, allowed members to claim their unique identity while also enforcing their image as "normal" upstanding citizens.

Freedom of Association: Deaf Clubs

The significance of Deaf clubs increased during the first half of the twentieth century. Some reasons for this were obvious. Deaf people simply preferred to socialize among their own, to communicate in their most natural language, which meant that any attempts to eliminate that language would never succeed. Particularly before the advent of technology that would enable Deaf people to communicate from remote locations, clubs were the centers of information, social activity, and cultural identity. In fact, Deaf clubs eclipsed

schools as the center of Sign Language preservation and therefore of Deaf culture in the early twentieth century. Ultimately, members' adherence to signed communication undermined the goals of oralists to eliminate the language and mainstream all Deaf people. Freed from the scrutiny of hearing people at the schools, Deaf club members naturally promoted and protected Sign Language in all their interactions with each other. Setting a "Deaf standard," club members celebrated Deaf-Deaf dating and marriage, presented plays about life in Deaf schools, enjoyed games that were visually accessible, and joined to address pertinent community issues. In addition, letters from readers of association newspapers enforced the inter- and intrastate networks of Sign Language advocates and created a common ground for expressing frustrations with society's negative view of Sign Language and the Deaf community.

While the state organizations focused on political activism, most societies for the Deaf emphasized the social side. Deaf clubs were, above all else, fun. Singles came to find mates, friends gathered to play cards, enjoy refreshments, dance, play sports, and catch up on gossip and other news. Since only Deaf newspapers enabled people to remain in touch with the community outside of face-to-face meetings, club members loyally subscribed and attended advertised events that fit their social identities.

Camaraderie defined many of the local organizations, and strong and friendly rivalries between clubs were common. In New York, for example, the Deaf Mutes Union League, League of Elect Sourds, and Deaf-Mutes Athletic Association competed in sporting events and fund-raisers ("New York," 1901, p. 3). In Ohio, the Cleveland Association of the Deaf united members with activism and socializing. Created in 1909 after a car killed a Deaf person, the organization fought to protect the welfare of the city's Deaf, ultimately expanding their scope of interest to include aid for the unemployed and injured, challenging impostors who sought alms, and offering social activities exclusively for single Deaf men and women ("Mr. Frieman's Address," 1913, p. 13).

Other local Deaf religious organizations provided social outlets for the community. The Hebrew Congregation of the Deaf (HCD), for instance, began around 1906 and had close contact with the New York Fanwood School. Like other groups, the HCD held balls, created a drama club, and sponsored boat and car excursions, in addition to their religious events. Forums, dramatic readings and tutoring were popular activities in the club as well. As membership swelled beyond 200, the HCD asked the larger organization in New York, the Society for the Welfare of the Jewish Deaf to act as the general agent of the Jewish community. By 1931, the group boasted over 500 members in New York, with various branches in Philadelphia, Chicago, and other major cities ("HAD Message," 1931, p. 1; "The Future of the HAD," 1916, pp. 6-7). The various organizations for Deaf people reflected the diverse interests and experiences of the community, but all shared a common use of an appreciation for signed communication.

Many of the local and state associations acknowledged their personal stake in the preservation of Sign Language among young people. As oralism infiltrated Deaf schools throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, Deaf leaders feared that students would create their own signs to communicate with each other and lose the historic tradition of experiencing "appropriate," eloquent signs from the masters, usually Deaf teachers. This literal communication breakdown isolated Deaf people from one another, and hampered attempts for members of the community to instill specific cultural values to the next generation, including pride in their identity and appreciation for the language and folklore which united them. Admittedly, many young Deaf people joined Deaf groups as adults and thus gained unhindered access to their culture. However, leaders fought to uphold the historic tradition of Deaf acculturation in the formative school years.

Although it was clear by the early decades of the twentieth century that Deaf people would defeat attempts to suppress Sign Language outside the schools, a real point of contention *within* the Deaf community was which Sign Language would remain. A major result of oralism's rise in the schools was the decline in Deaf teachers, often masters of Sign Language. The result was a rising disparity in signs between communities. As Elwood Stevenson, superintendent of the California school and son of Deaf parents, noted, "in the regular oral schools and special day schools, the children 'bootleg' signs as a means of communication among one another" (Stevenson, 1945, p. 4; see also Fay, 1916). Elizabeth Peet, dean of women at Gallaudet College, was more colorful in her criticism of oralism's impact on Sign Language. In a lecture to undergraduates at Gallaudet, she signed,

> The fact remain[s] that signs are used by the Deaf, and if not permitted openly in school, they shoot up in the dark like "weeds" . . . and the result is a curious and grotesque combination of furtive gestures and expressive faces which no one but the children themselves can understand. (Peet, 1934, p. 2)

The concern for advocates of Deaf culture was the deterioration of a sophisticated, graceful Sign Language, the Sign Language of the educated Deaf. As Tom L. Anderson, (known affectionately as TLA) vocational teacher and president of the NAD in 1940, forcefully described the situation:

> It is apparent to me that we have lost many of the influences which formerly tended to standardize the manual language. I am led to the conclusion that the loss of these influences, and the substitution of several more or less unwholesome influences, is tending to bring forward an inferior Sign Language which we refer to [as] "a Sign Language" more correctly than as "the Sign Language." . . . First, I believe that the Sign Language as it came to me through the acknowledged masters has suffered in the hands of young hearing people who have taken it up without proper grounding in theory and

> practice. . . . Second, the Sign Language as my generation inherited it has suffered the loss of its idiomatic grace and rhythm by being forced to trail along behind the spoken word. . . . Why, in place [of eloquent signs] must we be offered a mongrel gibberish—actually the "weed language" which an oral enthusiast once unjustly called the Sign Language of the past generation? (Anderson, 1938, pp. 120-121, 126)

Anderson's peers agreed, and differentiated which Sign Language they supported by consistently labeling it "the Sign Language," the beautiful Sign Language, and even more tellingly, the "Gallaudet Sign Language" (*NAD Proceedings*, 1910, p. 90). For Anderson and others, this break with the Sign Language of their cultural ancestors had historic significance as well as practical implications. While oralists could not eliminate signed language altogether, efforts to stifle the language of Clerc undermined Deaf people's ability to stand on equal intellectual and linguistic ground with their hearing peers. In essence, it sought to cut the tie between the past and present, leaving Deaf people without historic roots and more vulnerable to the gravitational pull of a mainstream, hearing world that stigmatized Deafness.

In an attempt to codify and legitimize the beautiful Sign Language to the hearing public, several dictionaries were created. The first was published in 1908 by J. Schuyler Long, a principal at the Iowa School for the Deaf and an opponent of pure oralism. His work began as a way to help hearing teachers communicate better with Deaf pupils and help Deaf graduates acquire a more certain and accurate command of their natural language. Long, an active member in various Deaf and educational organizations, also hoped to "preserve this expressive language, to which the Deaf owe so much, in its original purity and beauty, and . . . [provide] a standard of comparison in different parts of the country, thereby tending to secure greater uniformity" (Long, 1918, p. 10). Such uniformity in language, Long hoped, would also increase greater cohesion and unity within the Deaf community itself. Its reception, by Deaf members as well as their hearing advocates, was immediate and vast. By the 1950s four reprints had been made, and select sections were reproduced in the 1908 and 1909 issues of the *American Annals of the Deaf*, the premier journal for professional Deaf educators and administrators. Although the term "American Sign Language" (ASL) had not yet been coined, Long's explanation of the grammatical structure of this Sign Language demonstrated that it was a proper language and not simply manually coded English (cf. Anderson, 1938).

J. W. Michaels' *A Handbook of the Sign Language of the Deaf* appeared in 1923 and added further evidence of ASL's validity and its preferred use in the Deaf community. Although Michaels claimed that the primary purpose of his dictionary was to instruct seminary students so that they could serve the Deaf population, his public crusade for Sign Language use and preservation and his own popularity as a stylish signer influenced the production and promotion of the dictionary. Reverend Dan Higgins, similarly inspired, produced a sign dictionary for the clergy in 1924. *How to Talk to the Deaf*

warned hearing readers not to believe the propaganda of oralists that all Deaf people could speak and read lips, and presented Sign Language as a medium in which both communities could converse comfortably (Higgins, 1923). These dictionaries may not have reached the hearing world in substantial numbers, but their presence offered symbolic and real value for Deaf culture advocates. By publishing these works, the authors offered more substantive proof of Sign Language's use, beauty, and authenticity. Explaining how the linguistic system worked and presenting it as an important language posed an important counter image to oralist depictions of Sign Language; moreover, it presented another means of transmitting a codified, common language for Deaf people and hearing advocates across the nation.

Capturing a Movement: Films and Sign Language Preservation

Deaf leaders looked for other effective ways to further their Sign Language campaign. Some took advantage of modern technology to preserve and promote their Gallaudet Sign Language by turning to the recently developed moving pictures. Deaf people benefited in numerous ways from the advent of films. Members of the Deaf community not only enjoyed professionally produced entertainment on equal footing with hearing people since silent films included captions and accessible plots/acting, but they also began to record their own visual histories on film.

The National Association of the Deaf under the leadership of George Veditz led the most overtly political and nationally recognized attempt to use film to preserve Sign Language. Recognizing the decrease in master signers, Veditz sought to exploit the talents of remaining experts in hopes of raising a new generation of signing elite. As he explained in his presidential message at the 1910 NAD convention,

> We possess and jealously guard a language different and apart from any other in common use . . . a language with no fixed form or literature in the past, but which we are now striving to fix and give distinct literature of its own by means of the moving picture film. (Veditz, 1910, p. 22)

His own impassioned plea for Sign Language preservation was produced in 1913. This recording is the anchor for all the filmed documents. From 1910 to 1920 the NAD collected funds to produce film copies of signing masters. The films were comparable to commercially-produced works from the period and were particularly popular at Deaf clubs. While Deaf culture included the physical condition of Deafness as a central feature, the community demonstrated a more subtle understanding of their identity. The Veditz films represent not only a successful attempt to document Sign Language for future generations, but they also represent the reification of cultural values. What made the participants master signers was not solely their ability to express

ideas articulately in manual communication. Of equal importance was their identity as Deaf citizens.

The master signers of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century included hearing as well as Deaf leaders in the Deaf community. Gallaudet College's first president, Edward Miner Gallaudet, son of a Deaf woman and of the founder of Deaf education in America—and the most recognized advocate for Deaf rights in his generation—was the first sign master filmed in the series. The other hearing sign master was Gallaudet's vice-president, Edward Allen Fay, who grew up on a Deaf school campus and was also outspoken in his support of Sign Language and scholarship on Deafness. The other masters filmed likewise had advanced educations, and were successful as businessmen and scientists, educators or ministers; they made a sincere and active personal commitment to associations for the Deaf, and their moral character—by the standards of the time—was superior. In short, they represented to Deaf and hearing alike the vanguard of the Deaf intelligentsia.

The films generally followed one of three themes: American patriotism, Deaf history, or religious sermon. John Burton Hotchkiss' 1913 recitation of the poem *Memories of Old Hartford* is by far the most captivating of the collection and exemplifies the goals set forth by Veditz in 1910. Indeed, few people who viewed "Memories of Old Hartford," in which Hotchkiss described the founding of the first school for the Deaf and the role of Deaf pioneer Laurent Clerc, left with dry eyes. Hotchkiss' detailed description of his mentor had cultural and historical significance. Hotchkiss leaned toward his audience when he created a window into the personal past of a Deaf hero, parsing his sentences with his signature shrugs and nods. He frequently emphasized how well Clerc communicated, his striking figure—cane in hand, top hat and neat clothing—as well as Clerc's unlimited devotion to educating students and teaching academic subjects as well as manners. This personal memory passed along Clerc's tradition of articulate Sign Language, his attention to the next generation of Deaf people, and his gentle aristocratic approach to life. It also linked the generations by conveying in vivid detail one of the most revered figures in Deaf culture (Hotchkiss, 1997).

Robert McGregor gave several signed performances for the collection in 1913. His works *The Irishman's Flea* and *A Lay Sermon* demonstrate an alternate but equally classic example of cultural transmission and preservation of Sign Language. The first president of the NAD, McGregor became Deaf at age eight from "brain fever." Raised in Ohio and educated at the Ohio school, McGregor was known for his eloquent signs. He was robust and smooth in his execution, clear and regal. A popular storyteller with literary and dramatic talent, McGregor could perform both the Lord's Prayer and a hilarious tale with verve. McGregor's dedication and courageous spirit defined his career as an educator and activist. Known for his adroit writing skills, McGregor was a bulwark in the defense of Sign Language in schools. As principal at the

Ohio School for the Deaf until his death in 1920, McGregor encouraged the hiring of Deaf faculty and advocated Deaf rights in his state and across the nation. Although he never attended or worked at Gallaudet College, the inner sanctum of elite Deaf, McGregor's self-determination and adherence to what he saw as just afforded him a reputation as one of the foremost leaders in the Deaf world (*Buff and Blue*, 1937). His choices for the film collection succeeded in demonstrating several crucial points. Although his films were never captioned, his presentations were eminently comprehensible. The Lord's Prayer was a common choice among Deaf signers, since the words were commonly known and both Deaf and hearing could thus follow along more readily. By offering a religious lecture in signs, McGregor not only confirmed the historical link between Christian benevolence and Deaf education, but he also promoted the image of Deaf people as honest and moral citizens. His second, humorous performance (also visually accessible even to those with limited Sign Language knowledge) emphasized the secular commonalties. McGregor's story of the flea, executed with precise gestures and playful movements, was a masterpiece of cross-cultural humor. These filmed performances emphasized the malleability and potential of Sign Language and acknowledged a unique signed tradition within the Deaf community.

The NAD film series offered more than a close look at expert signing. Patriotic, intellectual, religious, and folklorish, these presentations captured in concept and application the goals of elite Deaf to prove their commonalty and loyalty as American citizens and legitimate their participation and place in society. At the same time, the subtext of these recitations underscored some distinguishing features of Deaf people: fiercely proud and protective of their unique history, humor, visual nature, sense of self-reliance, unique educational backgrounds, and ability to succeed in spite of mainstream discrimination.

The NAD film collection enjoyed wide circulation among Deaf clubs and suffered from the heavy use. The organization managed to copy the films onto more stable negatives in the 1920s and 1930s. Although no other master signers were filmed until after World War II, local clubs and amateur Deaf filmmakers continued to make use of the rapidly improving film equipment. Many of these films have been lost, but clips from conferences and local film projects, such as the 1912's "The Deaf of Minnesota" by Anton Schroeder, copied the basic format of the NAD series and expanded their context to include relatively more common Deaf people and experiences (Schroeder, 1912). Chicagoan Charles Krauel, a popular amateur Deaf filmmaker, and his Bell and Howell portable camera were particularly favored in the 1920s and 1930s. Krauel produced short films less to preserve the techniques of master signers than to inform Deaf people around the nation of events and people in local communities. Krauel's adventurous spirit took him across the nation to both film and perform. On his travels, he documented Deaf schools and interviewed Deaf individuals in various cities. An advertising tool for the NFSD, Krauel's films often focused on couples and groups of friends conversing happily in

Sign Language. He also paid particular attention to local heroes—Deaf businessmen and other successful people—who did not receive national attention from the major organizations. He captured on film many signed performances at high school graduations, inspiring pride in the academic achievement of the young Deaf population and in articulate Sign Language.

Deaf entertainment also became a major theme in Krauel's films. In one of his most favored films, Krauel recorded rhythmic signed performances, a particularly popular form. Much like cheers, these group performances were a mainstay at club picnics and other social events. Signed versions of the "Star Spangled Banner" and "Yankee Doodle," hits among the Deaf community and visually accessible to any viewer much like the Lord's Prayer, were common in Krauel's work. By focusing on the average Deaf person and social events, Krauel portrayed a community less aristocratic than the model presented by the NAD collection, and therefore more approachable to both Deaf and hearing viewers. These films were played for local audiences in Deaf clubs and churches across the nation. While Krauel never made a substantial profit from his endeavors, his goal of linking Deaf people together through this new medium succeeded (Supalla, 1994).

As "talkies"—films with sound—eclipsed the silent films of the 1920s, Deaf people lost access to popular entertainment. Ernest Marshall and others responded by creating their own entertainment films (see Schuchman, 1988). Marshal came from an extended Deaf family (parents and grandparents) and his uncle, Winfield Marshall, was one of the master signers recorded in the Veditz series. As a young boy at the Fanwood school, his expressive signs and comfort with the language earned him the nickname "Mr. Smart Sign," a title he relished throughout his years (Bangs, 1987). In 1937, using Deaf actors from his alma mater, Marshall produced his first full-length work in Sign Language. *It Is Too Late* was the simple story of a love triangle ending in the demise of the philanderer. Marshall's story, the first feature film in Sign Language, was a raging success among the Deaf club members who particularly appreciated the use of Deaf actors and actresses (Weinrib, 1994, p. 40). In 1938 Marshall produced *Magician of Magicians*. These works not only provided entertainment to Deaf people but were particularly important for promoting Sign Language as a "normal" means of communication. Although Sign Language films never became popular among the mainstream and the limited financial resources of the Deaf community restricted widespread use or expansion of this medium, their production nevertheless testifies to Deaf "normality" and Deaf agency.

The NAD films and those by Kraul and Marshall highlight some of the central factors informing the contest over Sign Language and Sign Language use. Sign language unified the Deaf community and often defined its difference from both mainstream society and those the community considered "disabled." Expectations and values placed on Sign Language, however, differed. One fault line within the community was educational background

and class. For most Deaf people, Sign Language simply represented a preferred means of communication. Often separate from a political or social agenda, the majority of Deaf adults chose to communicate in signs and associate with others who shared this language. When challenged directly by opponents of signed communication, they entered the public realm to defend it, but in the end, they primarily combated oralism simply by refusing to ascribe to it on a daily basis. In contrast, highly educated, elite Deaf people displayed a more complex interpretation of the issue, linking Sign Language use to ideals of social behavior, equal intellectual and citizen status with hearing people, and a noble cultural heritage. In addition, for these Deaf intelligentsia, attempts to preserve Sign Language also became a battle over who would remain as the role models for Sign Language, and what Sign Language they would use.

Race and gender also complicated the subtext in Sign Language use and instruction. There is scant evidence from Deaf newspapers or leaders about concerns of racial minorities' access to Sign Language. Admittedly, Asian, Hispanic and Native Americans represented a tiny fraction of the overall Deaf population. Even in geographic areas with great numbers of minorities, state associations rarely recognized them. African Americans fared especially poorly in education and access to traditional Deaf culture. As with hearing African Americans, few Black Deaf people received schooling prior to the Civil War. While many Northern and Western state schools for the Deaf were integrated, Southern schools resisted, establishing segregated institutes for Black Deaf students; for example, in 1948, 17 states had segregated schools. In 1905 Virginia and Louisiana still denied access to schools for these children. Other states like West Virginia simply paid schools in the North to take them (see "Hits and Misses," 1908). Recruiting qualified teachers plagued activists for Black Deaf education. As Thomas Flowers, an African-American Deaf man, noted in 1914, few teachers expressed interest in working with this population, and the number of "colored teachers" remained limited (Flowers, 1914, pp. 100-101). In 1931 the president of the Convention of American Instructors for the Deaf complained that numbers remained low but offered no tangible solutions to the problem. ("President's address," 1931, p. 367).

Results from the Mississippi School are indicative of southern Black education. Between 1873 and 1933 only six students graduated from high school. Sixty-seven out of seventy-two dropped out and none graduated between 1933 and 1943. From 1944 to 1954, only six more completed school. Other southern schools also rarely graduated their African American pupils. In 1914 Harry Burton Davis became the first Black student to earn a certificate at the Missouri School (Hairston & Smith, 1983, p. 68; Williams, 1929, p. 210). North Carolina did not graduate a student before 1932 (Crockett, 1949, p. 23). Without strong faculty and support, and recognizing employment discrimination against this population, administrators emphasized the physical abilities of Black students, encouraging vocational training over traditional classwork (Buchanan, 1999; see also Leaky, 1993). Gallaudet College, the

hub of Deaf elite education, flatly refused African American students before the Second World War. While some statistics suggest that Black members expressed significantly less ability to read lips than their Caucasians peers, they also appear to have relied more heavily on a miscellaneous combination of communication modes (see Best, 1943, pp. 206, 211).

Many Deaf associations, including the NAD, NFSD, as well as some churches, also denied African American membership. Marginalized by the "mainstream" Deaf community, African American members had considerably fewer role models from this society. Because of limited documentation, their use of and skill with Sign Language remains difficult to ascertain. However, Deaf leaders did not attempt to counter the obviously inferior means by which Deaf Black people gained language and general education, and probably shared commonly held racist views towards their Black peers.

Contests with oralists played out differently for Deaf women. Oral advocates, often women, paid particular attention to Deaf female students. Consistently, women outnumbered men as oral "successes" (see Best, 1943, pp. 202, 221). Many parents particularly encouraged their Deaf daughters to practice their oral skills in hopes of attracting hearing suitors. Although many ultimately married Deaf partners, their training in speech informed their sense of self and often won them praise even from Deaf leaders.[2] Oral education furthermore encouraged hearing women to replace Deaf teachers in the schools, displacing Deaf women more often than Deaf men. Thus, while Deaf girls and boys had equally limited access to any Deaf teachers in schools, the girls had comparatively fewer gender role models from their cultural community.

For girls who excelled in school in spite of these and other limitations, becoming an educated elite was difficult. Gallaudet College's first president, Edward Miner Gallaudet, clearly disapproved of females entering his school. After the first group of Gallaudet women had graduated, Edward Miner Gallaudet closed admission to women. Several women took the lead in opposing their exclusion and after a decade of rebuttals, the college relented, opening their doors to women again in 1887.[3] Even after co-education resumed however, Gallaudet, like other colleges, produced more male graduates than female.[4] Those who continued to study at the Deaf college faced limited access to many clubs, and often entered a less rigorous academic track.

National and state associations, the other bastions of active Sign Language preservation, had an ambivalent relationship with women. The NAD, for example, included only one woman in their film series of sign masters, and her recitation represented a significant departure from the norm. Dressed in Indian costume, Mary Williamson Erd performed Henry Longfellow's poem *Death of Minnehaha* in 1938. While elegant in its flowing execution, the work is less formal than the other NAD films, and the visual framing of the scene often belies the intention of capturing master signers. Unlike the films of male orators, this work captures Williamson from a distance, taking in her whole body and the woods surrounding her. Presenting herself as Minnehaha,

Williamson appears more as an adroit actress than an elite signer, and her presence did not invoke the rich heritage or moral rectitude that infused all the other performances. In other ways, the NAD perceived and treated its female members differently. It had several token female officers in the 1920s, but they and other female members had no voting rights in the organization until 1964 (Burnes, 1981, p. 386; Holcomb & Wood, 1989, p. 143). While allowed to express themselves in discussions and social activities, few had any political or social authority in the campaigns to preserve and promote Sign Language.

The NFSD denied women membership altogether, claiming that women should stay at home (see "Admission of Women," 1929; "Woman Question Again," 1929). Female participation remained one of the more acrimonious bones of contention in the early decades of the association's development. Many state and local organizations allowed female members, yet few had positions of power. Others, like the New Jersey Association of the Deaf, rejected female membership until the Second World War ("The Gleaner Says," 1939, p. 2).

Deaf women resisted attempts to suppress their role in Sign Language preservation. Some, like Ida Montgomery, represented a small but dedicated corps of staff and faculty at schools. Montgomery dedicated 40 years of her life to the Fanwood School in New York. An elegant signer, she worked with students considered slow and backward, instilling a strong sense of Deaf pride and optimism in generations of students. She spent her retirement years living with Elizabeth Peet, another distinguished Deafened woman and daughter of the Deaf poet Mary Tooles Peet. Montgomery lived on Gallaudet's campus, teaching students "correct" Sign Language and promoting literary events.

Creating networks of their own, female students established clubs and auxiliaries, like the OWLs at Gallaudet College, Camp Fire Girls at state schools, and the NFSD auxiliary club. Such groups allowed women to express their ideas and concerns with their female peers. While few of these groups overtly campaigned for Sign Language preservation, the common use of and pride in it reflected the special place Sign Language held for them. Often using their roles as mother and wife, Deaf women influenced generations of Deaf and hearing people, serving at once as helpmate and educator.

The early twentieth century brought discord to the Deaf community in the form of oralism. Deaf people struggled against efforts to supplant signed communication with actual speech. This struggle prompted efforts to preserve Sign Language themselves. By producing dictionaries and films, the Deaf legitimated their language—not only to themselves but to the broader community. By protecting and codifying their Sign Language, Deaf people unified their community. Deaf people rejected the social stigma of their physical condition and transformed the visible "signs" of this condition into a cultural experience. Viewing themselves as a linguistic and cultural group, Deaf people joined Deaf clubs after graduation from school and devoted

much of their free time to socializing with their peers. While public campaigns to protect Sign Language in the schools appealed primarily to Deaf elites, average Deaf citizens played an important role in its preservation simply by using it as their primary mode of communication. Members from all walks of life praised master signers and enjoyed humor specific to their experiences and joke which exploited the malleability of signs. For some, proper signing skills suggested proper upbringing—a linguistic manifestation of social beliefs. For the various groups within the Deaf community, Sign Language had different social and cultural meaning. In the end, though, Sign Language remained the cornerstone of their culture. Attempts and successes in protecting their language demonstrate the central importance this language held for the community. Even within increasingly hostile environments, the Deaf community found ways to advocate and transmit their culture.

Today ASL is recognized as a legitimate and distinct language. In some states like Ohio and Texas hearing high school students may study ASL for their foreign language requirement. There also is a proliferation of Deaf studies, courses, and programs offered to Deaf as well as interested hearing people across the nation. Such educational policy changes have enhanced our understanding of this linguistic minority and promoted a positive relationship between mainstream society and the Deaf world. At the same time, however, significant challenges remain. For example, financial constraints and the increase of mainstreaming programs have contributed to the closing of state residential schools for the Deaf. One obvious result is the limited cultural as well as education choice of a Deaf-oriented school experience for many young people. Scholars and advocates of heritage language communities have much to learn from the experiences of Deaf people, which promises to enhance and clarify the agenda to promote and protect members of our society with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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Endnotes

[1] Hanson personally reached thousands of Deaf people in his secular role as leader of the NAD. As a religious leader, his record is also impressive. In the aforementioned report, he claimed that as a deacon in Seattle, Washington, with outreach work in Olympia and Portland, he averaged 42 services a year and had 21 communicants and about 600 Deaf people in his field.

[2] It was not uncommon for major Deaf publications to note that wives of spotlighted members could speak.

[3] The rise of oralism disproportionately influenced women as well. Many Gallaudet graduates became teachers, a respected position in Deaf society. When hearing women infiltrated the profession, schools hired Deaf men more than Deaf women to teach. This arose in part because Deaf men were considered the breadwinners in families, and women often left work after marrying. An attempt to counter the rise of (hearing) women in schools while restricting expenditures (Deaf faculty cost less than hearing faculty at most schools) also contributed to the displacement of Deaf women teachers.

[4] The double-discrimination of being African American and female barred this minority group from graduating anyone from Gallaudet until 1957.