

SUSAN BURCH

Capturing a Movement: Sign Language Preservation

THE REAL AND SYMBOLIC value of sign language remains at the crux of Deaf people's identity. Since the inception of schools for deaf students in America, the use of sign language as the primary mode of classroom communication has enabled students' easy access to knowledge. It fits the visual needs of those who cannot hear and for whom reading lips proves cumbersome, if not impossible. Its pedagogical implications—the significance of sign language—transcends the classroom. Deaf people, then as now, have embraced it as the most obvious characteristic of their community. They have come to define themselves principally as a linguistic group. In many ways sign language frames the perceived and real differences between this group and mainstream society.

Emphasizing the liberating nature of sign language, which allows unhindered expression of ideas, Deaf people focus not on how they differ, but on what they hold in common with hearing people. This includes the ability to learn, share ideas and emotions, work, marry, and raise families—in short, to enjoy a full, enriching life. Given unfettered communication, leaders have posited, Deaf people are no longer people with a handicap. As leaders have noted, communication differences—and the discrimination this causes—pose the only real obstacle for Deaf people. By protecting and promoting the use of sign language, the Deaf community seeks to reduce that barrier.

Susan Burch is an associate professor of history at Gallaudet University and the author of *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II*.

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At the same time, Deaf community members also proudly express their identity not only among each other but also to the outside world.

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, thus losing the historic tradition of experiencing “appropriate” eloquent signs from the masters, usually Deaf teachers. This communication breakdown isolated Deaf people from one another. It also hampered attempts by members of the community to instill specific cultural values in the next generation such as pride in their identity and appreciation for the language and folklore that united them.

Leaders in the Deaf world then devoted themselves to public campaigns, promising to protect sign language. Some exploited new technology, using motion pictures to capture their heritage language. The National Association of the Deaf, under the leadership of George Veditz, led one of the most overtly political and nationally recognized attempts to use film to preserve signs. Acknowledging the decrease in master signers, Veditz sought to exploit the talents of the remaining experts to raise a new generation of a signing elite. Others in the community used Deaf periodicals to express their advocacy. Rank-and-file Deaf citizens played an important role in sign language preservation, too, simply by using it as their primary mode of communication. Overt or subtle, intentional or instinctive, these diverse actions effectively complemented and fortified the goal of preserving and promoting sign language in America. This article examines some of the ways Deaf people have successfully maintained their heritage language and, in the process, strengthened their community.

Residential school administrators, fortunately, never widely adopted oralism in its most extreme form. The vast majority of residential schools for deaf students in the early twentieth century used variations of a combined method, which included signed communication in addition to speech and lipreading education.¹ Chapel services, an established feature in most oral schools and virtually all combined schools, also consistently promoted sign language. Such services ultimately provided a link between Deaf students and the



FIGURE 1. The laying of the cornerstone of the new All Souls' Church for the Deaf, Philadelphia, 1913.

broader Deaf world. Deaf ministers preached to the students in sign language on a weekly basis. They also conducted Bible study classes and other programs conducted in signs.² In order to promote religious observance, the schools required attendance at these events. This policy unintentionally endorsed the use of visual language. In addition, signed religious instruction created a bridge between students and the outside Deaf community by introducing adult Deaf leaders to Deaf school children. Such interactions 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 for religiously minded Deaf people. They helped preserve and transmit sign language as well.

In Deaf churches, ministers preached in sign language in part because it was practical: Deaf people could not read lips from distant pews.³ Communicating religious thought through sign language also had ties to religious belief 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 Episcopalian diocese of Missouri and friend to the Deaf community, 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.”⁴

Addressing Deaf people in a public venue such as a church demanded a polished 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 Deaf people had ample opportunity to preach at state schools for deaf students. The message was essential to religious education, and the medium unified the culture. Deaf ministers shared with school teachers and administrators a desire to combat immorality and to instill a strong sense of Judeo-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, middle-class Deaf elite, ministers participated in a national network of peers. Moreover, they enjoyed considerable prestige within the Deaf community. Through their work Deaf missionaries enlarged young Deaf students’ sphere of reference and helped them to recognize their potential.

Of equal importance, Deaf churches bridged communities and ideas. It is clear from remarks made by both leaders and followers that the spiritual elite used their pulpits to link religious values with Deaf political issues.⁵ Often Deaf ministers and supportive hearing ones took leading roles in major social and political organizations, including the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD).

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. Some seminaries even began including sign language training for potential missionaries among the Deaf.⁶ 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.

Deaf clubs further demonstrated the staying power of sign language. Often created as alumni associations from state schools for deaf students, local clubs became centers of a lively social life for Deaf people in the twentieth century. Such associations provided a place not only to meet friends and find spouses, but also to freely communicate in sign language. The NAD began in 1880 as a response to the growing need for a national Deaf network and particularly to combat the suppression of sign language in schools for deaf pupils. The NAD, and later the NFSD (the "Frat"), held conferences in which sign was always the medium of communication, with voiced interpretation when necessary. These two organizations frequently published editorials in their bulletins on the need to preserve "the beautiful sign language." The fact that NAD passed resolutions on preserving sign language at every conference demonstrates the relevance signs had for these activists. At times the NAD encouraged superintendents to join them in preserving signs in the schools by maintaining Deaf teachers or including formal instruction; at other meetings they compromised and commended any general attempt to preserve and extend the sign language. The category of "sign language," moreover, was separate from the category "education," suggesting that Deaf elites recognized that the confrontation to preserve sign language transcended the boundaries of the schoolyard.

Local associations, supported by a broader cross-section of the Deaf population than the more elite national organizations, focused primarily on local environs and the place of sign language in daily life. State and local club proceedings note frequent signed performances by local masters and attest to active committees to address the use of sign language in deaf schools. For example, the Minnesota Association of the Deaf and the Kansas State Association not only hosted speakers praising and presenting in sign, but also sought to establish systematic instruction of sign language in the schools.⁷ Likewise, the Iowa Association of the Deaf promised—and backed up with action—to resist "to the man" any effort to abolish sign language.⁸ The Pas-à-Pas club was established in direct response to the rise of oralism in Chicago's schools for deaf students. This literary club of Deaf elites met for social and intellectual events and was effusive in its commentary about deaf schools. The resulting local

battles with school administrators and state politicians proved valuable in the struggle to preserve and promote sign language.

By the 1940s such Deaf efforts had produced some obvious successes as sign classes were reinstated at many residential schools, led by California, Michigan, Oregon, Kansas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. In 1940 the Virginia School also added manual classes to the regular curriculum for students planning to attend Gallaudet.⁹ A letter from the dean of the Teachers College of George Washington University to Elizabeth Peet, professor of languages at Gallaudet College, speaks eloquently of the acceptance of sign language as an autonomous and legitimate member of the family of languages:

My dear Miss Peet: Pardon my long delay in answering your letter pertaining to Miss Wafter's work in the sign language. We have recently reconsidered several items of credit and are now granting six semester hours for this work. This puts it on par with a full year of work in a foreign language taken in the university. Very Truly Yours,

(Signed) W. C. Ruediger, Dean. May 25, 1923.¹⁰

At clubs and in their publications, Deaf people conveyed information about upcoming signed events, such as lectures and church services. In fact, Deaf clubs eclipsed schools as the center of sign language preservation and therefore of Deaf culture in the early twentieth century, and their nationwide adherence to signed communication undermined the oralists' goals of eliminating the language and mainstreaming the Deaf culture. Letters from readers of association publications 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.

Deaf clubs also became the leading bulwark of sign preservation in other, less overtly political, ways. Deaf people simply preferred to socialize among their own and 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 (such as the TTY and closed captioning) that would enable Deaf people to communicate from remote locations, clubs were the centers of information, social activity, and cultural identity. Freed from

the scrutiny of hearing people at the schools, Deaf club members promoted and protected sign language in all their interactions with each other.

It was clear by the early decades of the twentieth century that Deaf people would defeat attempts to suppress sign language outside the schools. Still, a real point of contention *within* the Deaf community focused on which sign language would remain. Oralism's rise in the schools led directly to the decline in Deaf teachers, often masters of sign language. This in turn caused a rising disparity in signs among communities.

Advocates of Deaf culture worried about the deterioration of a sophisticated, graceful sign language, the sign language of educated Deaf people. A vocational teacher and president of the NAD in the 1940s, Tom L. Anderson (known affectionately as TLA) forcefully describes 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?¹¹

Anderson's peers agreed. They differentiated among signed languages by consistently labeling theirs as "the Sign Language," "the beautiful Sign Language," or even more tellingly, the "Gallaudet sign language."¹² For Anderson and other educated Deaf people, this break with the sign language of their cultural ancestors had historic significance as well as practical implications. Oralists could not eliminate signed language altogether, yet 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, such efforts sought to cut the tie between the past and present, leaving Deaf people without historic roots. This left them more vulnerable to the gravitational pull of a mainstream hearing world that stigmatized Deafness.

In an attempt to codify “the beautiful Sign Language” and to legitimize it to the hearing public, Deaf leaders created several dictionaries. J. Schuyler Long published the first one in 1909. A principal at the Iowa School for the Deaf, Long strongly opposed pure oralism. His work began as a way to help hearing teachers communicate better with Deaf pupils. He also wanted Deaf graduates to acquire a more certain and accurate command of their natural language. An active member in various Deaf and educational organizations, Long aspired 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.”¹³ Such uniformity in language, according to Long, promised to increase unity within the Deaf community. The dictionary’s reception, by Deaf people as well as their hearing advocates, was immediate and vast. The *American Annals of the Deaf*, the premier journal for professional deaf educators and administrators, reprinted excerpts of Long’s dictionary in its 1908 and 1909 issues. By the 1950s the entire work had gone into its fourth printing. The name “American Sign Language” (ASL) had not yet been coined, but Long’s explanation of the grammatical structure of this sign language demonstrated that it was not simply manually coded English. Rather, his dictionary represented a proper language.¹⁴

When J. W. Michaels’s *Handbook of the Sign Language of the Deaf* appeared in 1923, it added further evidence of ASL’s validity and the preference for using sign language in the Deaf community. Michaels intended his dictionary primarily for seminary students, hoping that they could serve the Deaf population. His public crusade for sign language use and preservation, plus his own popularity as a stylish signer, clearly influenced the production and promotion of the dictionary as well. 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



FIGURE 2. The J. S. Long dictionary

all deaf people could speak and read lips. His work presented sign language as a better medium through which both communities could converse comfortably.¹⁵

These dictionaries may not have reached the hearing world in substantial numbers, but Deaf culture advocates found both symbolic and real value in them. By publishing these works, the authors offered more substantive proof of sign's use, beauty, and authenticity as a language. Explaining how the linguistic system worked and presenting it as a legitimate language challenged oralist depictions of signs. Moreover, this presentation proved to be another means of transmitting a codified, common language for Deaf people and their hearing advocates across the nation.

The broad trends of assimilation and acculturation influenced the Deaf community in several significant ways. Of particular importance was the concerted effort to protect the language that connected the

community: sign language. The early twentieth century brought discord to the Deaf community in the form of oralism. Deaf people struggled against oralists' efforts to supplant signed communication with actual speech. This contest prompted them to preserve sign language themselves. By producing dictionaries and films, Deaf people legitimated their language—not only to themselves but also to the broader society. By protecting and codifying their sign language, Deaf people unified their community. This in turn helped them resist the potent campaigns of assimilation and acculturation.

As part of their defense, Deaf people rejected the social stigma of their physical condition, transforming its visible “signs” 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. For the various groups within the Deaf community, sign language had different social and cultural meanings. Members from all walks of life praised master signers and enjoyed humor specific to their experiences. For many Deaf individuals like John Burton Hotchkiss, proper signing skills suggested proper upbringing—a linguistic manifestation of social beliefs. As his former student Kelly Stevens notes:

John Burton Hotchkiss learned in its purity the language of signs, the inheritance of the Hartford School from France, as taught at the School by Laurent Clerc. . . . These signs, correct in etymology and sanctioned by tradition, the pupils of the Doctor took with them to give pleasure and profit to themselves and the deaf among whom they worked.¹⁶

Hotchkiss's colleague at Gallaudet, Elizabeth Peet, adds:

He had no patience with slang signs; nor with those persons who deliberately made grotesque gestures for the mere amusement of others. . . . His influence for the uplift of the language has been marked in [Gallaudet] college. . . . [L]et us not forget his staunch defense, both by precept and example, of the silent language that he loved so well.¹⁷

Hotchkiss and his peers devoted themselves to public campaigns, promising to protect sign language in the schools. Many members of the community successfully defended sign language apart from the

public debates on methodology by using it as a natural feature of their daily lives. For others, protecting and promoting sign language became a deliberate political act. Both approaches contributed ultimately to the successful preservation and promotion of their language. Through personal ties within the schools and casual interaction outside the classroom, in Deaf churches, publications, dictionaries, public relations campaigns, moving pictures, and associations, Deaf people reinforced their common identity as a linguistic minority. In the end sign language has remained the cornerstone of Deaf culture. Even within increasingly hostile environs, members of the Deaf community have found ways to advocate and transmit their culture.

Notes

1. Percival Hall claimed in "Education of the Deaf" that in 1919 eighty percent of students were taught in combined schools that had strong oral programs. See "The Education of the Deaf: Biennial Survey of Education, 1918–1920," 8; see also *American Annals of the Deaf* 65 (1920). Harry Best's statistics confirm this number and show that oral education did not exceed it in the following decades. Harry Best, *Deafness and the Deaf in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 537–38.

2. For commentary on school chapel services see "Present Tendencies Not Favorable to the Moral and Religious Development of the Deaf," in *Proceedings of the Fifth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf* (1896), 20–21; Grace Warren Rowell, *The Relationship between Religion and a System of Education for the Deaf* (Master's thesis, Gallaudet College, 1937).

3. As one minister claimed on behalf of his fellow clergymen, "But to be really comforting and satisfying, [a] 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 of Church Work among the Deaf in the United States* (1929), 12–13.

4. "A Prayer for the Sign Language" *Silent Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (Dec. 1925): 3; see also "Worship by Signs Favored by the Deaf," *Silent Worker* (June 1929): 218–19; "Priests Advocate the Sign Language," *Ohio Chronicle* (Nov. 20, 1937): 1.

5. For example, see *Jewish Deaf, Silent Worker or Deaf Mute's Journal*. Often ministers published reviews and updates of Deaf ministry, as seen in Herbert Merrill's "Church Work among the Deaf," *Digest of the Deaf* (Dec. 1938): 26–27; Philip Hasenstab, "The Moral and Religious Status of the Deaf in the United States," *NAD Proceedings* (1904), 153–54.

6. J.W. Michaels was particularly influential in the Baptist community in the South. His dictionary was intended to help ministers communicate more readily with deaf parishioners. See Robert Marshall Landes, *The Life and Works of J.W. Michaels: First Southern Baptist Missionary to the Deaf and Developments in Deaf Work Among Southern Baptists* (n.p., 1965).
7. Minnesota Association of the Deaf, *Proceedings of the Twelfth Biennial Convention* (July 2–5, 1913), 38; George Veditz, "The Kansas Resolutions," *The Jewish Deaf* 9, no. 8 (Nov. 1923): 16.
8. See *The First One Hundred Years of the Iowa Association of the Deaf, 1881–1981* (IAD, 1983).
9. "Virginia School," *Silent Cavalier* (1940): 1.
10. "Recognition of Sign Language," *American Annals of the Deaf* (1923): 347; "The Deaf World," *Silent Worker* (May 1923): 316.
11. Tom L. Anderson, "What of the Sign Language?" *American Annals of the Deaf* 83 (1938): 120–21, 126. Anderson encouraged greater interaction between deaf children and the remaining master signers and promoted public presentations by those with articulate signing skills.
12. *Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf* (1910), 90. See the proceedings for the other National Association of the Deaf conventions between 1900 and 1940; see the proceedings of the Kansas State Association of the Deaf for this time period as well.
13. J. S. Long, *The Sign Language: A Manual of Signs* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1909), 10.
14. Tom L. Anderson would concur in 1938, when he complained that the attempt to put signs in English word order had altered their true structure. See Anderson's "What of the Sign Language?" *American Annals of the Deaf* 83 (1938): 122.
15. See D. D. Higgins, *How to Talk to the Deaf* (Newark: Mount Carmel Guild, 1923), introduction.
16. Kelly Stevens, "Memorial to Dr. John Burton Hotchkiss," *Silent Worker* (Jan. 1924): 126.
17. Elizabeth Peet, "Memorial to Dr. John Burton Hotchkiss," *Silent Worker* (Jan. 1924): 129.