

CULTURE/LANGUAGE NOTES

Brief History of Deaf America

In 1817 Laurent Clerc, a Deaf teacher from the National Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris, came to the United States to help Thomas H. Gallaudet, a hearing American, start America's first School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Clerc brought from the Paris school a highly effective teaching method using Sign Language, the language of Deaf people.

Graduates of the Hartford School went on to establish similar residential Schools for the Deaf in other states. Many Deaf people became teachers of the Deaf and Sign Language was the language of instruction in the classroom. Then in 1864, the first university for the Deaf (now called Gallaudet University) was established by a charter signed by President Lincoln.

Late in the 19th century the tide began to turn against Deaf people and their language. In 1880, the International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy adopted a resolution banning the use of Sign Language in teaching deaf children. The "oral method" of teaching gained momentum; speech and lipreading became the primary educational goal. Deaf people were discouraged from entering the teaching profession, and Sign Language was no longer permitted in the classroom.

Also in 1880 the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio. This organization brought Deaf people together from around the country to work for their common interests and fight discrimination in schools and workplaces. Around the turn of the century, because of a growing concern that American Sign Language would be lost, the NAD established a fund used to make a series of films in Sign Language. One of these films is George Veditz's *Preservation of Sign Language*. Over the years, the NAD has fought public ignorance of deafness, underemployment of Deaf people, discrimination against Deaf people who were denied driver's licenses, discrimination against Deaf teachers, double tax exemption for Deaf people, and the strictly oral method in education of the Deaf.

The years from 1900 to 1960 could be considered the "Dark Ages" of Deaf history. What sustained the community during this period of strong oralism and lack of social understanding was the Deaf clubs. Local clubs provided a place where Deaf people could congregate to socialize, share the latest news, organize around political issues, plan events and outings, and, in later years, watch captioned films. The clubs nourished the sense of group loyalty and community, maintained the culture, and preserved the cherished language.

In 1901 the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) was formed to provide insurance to Deaf people. Initially providing burial benefits to members, the "Frat" expanded to include life, sickness, and accident insurance, and later fought discrimination against Deaf drivers in getting automobile insurance.

Through the years of the First World War and the depression, attempts to improve Deaf people's lives were not given priority, as was true for most minority groups. During the 1940's, however, the NAD was successful in getting the Civil Service Commission to revoke a ruling that discriminated against Deaf printers, making lucrative positions available to many Deaf people. During World War II, many Deaf people became "soldiers on the assembly line,"* performing a large variety of jobs and demonstrating that the abilities of Deaf people can contribute to any work force.

The 1960's ushered in an era of change, as evidenced by the following milestones:

- Teletypewriters for the Deaf (TTYs) were invented by a deaf man in 1964 and began to take hold during the 1970's. Later, with the invention of telecaption decoders, television too became accessible to deaf people.
- The National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf was founded in 1964, leading to increased respect for, and greater proficiency within, the profession.
- The first linguistic study of American Sign Language was published in 1965. The study was made by William Stokoe at Gallaudet and had great impact on continued research and recognition of ASL.
- The educational philosophy of "Total Communication" began to gain acceptance, and signs were again permitted in the schools.
- In 1966, the NAD fought for the right of a Deaf couple in California to adopt a foster child. The judge had said that the child would not have a normal home environment with Deaf parents. After an outpouring of support from the Deaf communities all over the U.S., the couple was awarded custody of the child.
- The National Theatre of the Deaf first toured in 1967, spreading awareness and appreciation of ASL throughout the world.
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (often called the civil rights act for disabled people) was finally signed into law in 1976. This law requires that any institution receiving federal funds be accessible to all disabled people. Sign Language interpreting services began to be provided at many colleges around the country, as well as in hospitals, courtrooms, government agencies and various workplaces.
- In 1979, when the movie *Voices* was produced featuring a hearing performer in the role of a Deaf character, Deaf people staged a successful boycott of the movie in several cities, forcing the distributor to withdraw the film from the market. Since then, Deaf performers have become more visible on television, stage, and film, and Deaf people are more often hired to perform in Deaf roles.

In recent years, there has been increased academic acceptance of American Sign Language in colleges and universities. There has also been a growing recognition of Deaf culture by the general public. Deaf individuals are beginning to attain decision-making positions where they can make a difference in the lives of Deaf people. The "Deaf President Now" rally at Gallaudet University in the spring of 1988 drew widespread support not only from members of the Deaf community, but from many people in all walks of life. What happened at Gallaudet that fateful week was the culmination of a people's struggle to break the chains of paternalism. This struggle for Deaf rights and self-determination continues. The protest at Gallaudet is seen by many as the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Deaf America.

*Jack R. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*, National Association of the Deaf, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1981, p. 222. For more information on the history of Deaf America, see Gannon's book and other NAD publications, as well as Harlan Lane, *When The Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf*, Random House, NY, 1984.