

LANGUAGE IN PERFORMANCE

Legends

It is not uncommon to see a group of Deaf people gathered and held simply by the narrative of a story. What better story than one that idealizes the feats of Deaf people throughout history? These stories reaffirm the present by instilling meaning into the past. There are many such legends told throughout the Deaf community. By retelling these stories, the community develops a special shared knowledge essential to its existence.

The Deaf Spies of the Civil War. In his introduction to this piece, Sam Supalla explains that Ben will present a legend about Deaf people during the Civil War, a legend that has been passed on through the generations. This legend is about two Deaf soldiers, one who fought for the Union army and the other a Confederate.* They were each sent out to spy on the opposing army. They ran into each other, waited for a few moments in suspense, and when neither one spoke they each realized that the other was Deaf. In great relief, they set down their guns and ended up chatting all afternoon. After waiting for his spy's return, the Union captain finally sent out a search party. They found the two soldiers talking and assumed they were trading military secrets. The two soldiers were arrested and brought back for trial. The captain appealed to President Lincoln before passing judgment. Lincoln, who was preparing to sign the charter to found Gallaudet University, responded that the two soldiers demonstrated the true meaning of brotherhood, a concept otherwise devastated by the war.

This Civil War legend may be based on an actual incident, but is elaborated to emphasize the moral of the story, which is that political, religious and economic differences are superseded by the bonds shared by Deaf people. This story stresses the cultural value of solidarity among Deaf people, the idea that if they stick together, Deaf people will survive.

End of Unit 17

*Although currently Deaf people are classified as 4F, and therefore are not used as soldiers in the U.S. military, they were apparently permitted to fight during the Civil War. There is in fact a related legend about the 4F classification being established during the Civil War. According to the legend, an important general became frustrated with Deaf soldiers because of their lack of response to his speech, and in retaliation he set up the 4F classification. Another related legend Ben alludes to in this story is that the statue of Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial has one hand in the A-handshape and the other in the L-handshape (Lincoln's initials) because the sculptor of the statue was the same one who created the statue of Gallaudet and Alice Cogswell, now on the grounds of Gallaudet University.